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HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Volume 38 Winter 2018



LIVING WITH AMBIGUITY

Might ambiguity actually be a blessing?

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HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Human Development Magazine is a quarterly publication for people involved in the work of fostering the human and spiritual growth of others. This includes persons involved in religious leadership and formation, spiritual direction, pastoral care, education, counseling healthcare and those interested in the development of the whole person.

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HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Winter 2018

Dear friends of Human Development Magazine:

More than a year ago when our editorial board was discussing potential themes for future issues, without exception everyone agreed that "Living with Ambiguity" would be most relevant and timely; we all deal with ambiguity!

No one likes ambiguity; we prefer simple, clear ideas. The media and politicians, even preachers and teachers, understand the value of "soundbites" and catchy slogans. Yet we know that even nature itself is ambiguous; it cannot be captured or controlled. Consider fog and mist and the "predictable unpredictability" of our ever-changing weather!

As children, we hung onto many absolutes and knew exactly what we liked and disliked. As we have aged, we have come to appreciate the "beige" of life because we understand that everything is nuanced and textured. We learn to accept ambiguity in relationships with each other and in our relationship with God. Uncertainty is our reality.

Must we simply resign ourselves to ambiguity? Is there a way to work through ambiguity? Can a spiritually-balanced, well-developed person come to peace with ambiguity? These are questions that this issue of Human Development seeks to address. We are blessed with a wide variety of authors tackling the topic from many different perspectives.

Our lead article by the Dominican author and preacher Father Brian Pierce sets the tone with the familiar image from Robert Frost's poem about choosing between two pathways of life. Choice implies a certain ambiguity: we wonder about the path not taken. With every decision another choice follows. The ambiguity gets all the more complicated! Is there a way to find steady confidence in the midst of this process? Fr. Pierce speaks about living peacefully with incompleteness in our lives and letting our heart hold the "healthy tension" of diverse possibilities.

Dr. Paul Wadell suggests that people of hope can handle the unsolved mysteries of life. As he explains, hope is our "default position" as human beings; we want to believe in positive possibilities for ourselves and our world. Hope emerges gradually and naturally as we are open and patient.

Dr. T. Derrick Witherington writes of ambiguity as a "blessing." Why might ambiguity be a blessing? It allows for the mystery of sacraments which manifest and conceal at the same time. He moves from the realm of theory and sacramental logic to an application – the ambiguous situation of non-practicing parents in France who want to have their children baptized. What is the proper pastoral response? Read his article and you will discover a very compelling logic.

As a professor at Fordham University in New York, Dr. Aristotle Papanikolaou offers some insights on how Millennials deal with ambiguity. He notes that for the most part, they are not comfortable with ambiguity – particularly with regard to religious leaders and institutions. They expect an absolute correspondence between what leaders profess and the reality of their daily lives. By reference to the image of people learning to dance, he helps Millennials come to an appreciation of faith and religious structures as an "acquired art." Just as a dancer does not simply go through motions but literally becomes the dance, so too a person of faith allows the love of God to become their primary mode of living.

Borrowing a phrase from the opening line of an Emily Dickinson poem, Fr. Honeygosky speaks about living in possibilities. Such is the gift that ambiguity offers; there are no closed doors but rather, there is always reason for hope and a new beginning precisely because we are not walking into a situation with pre-set absolutes.

With her usual insight and precision, Dr. Susan Muto offers us insights on the spirituality of St. John of the Cross. Obviously, the "dark night of the soul" involves a certain amount of ambiguity! St. John of the Cross at the same moment, however, is able to say with deep faith and trust that he is ready to set aside everything; his sole desire is God. Dr. Muto talks about the "work" of asceticism on the way to a mystical union with the Lord. Ambiguity is part of every stage of that journey.

Passionist retreat master Fr. Phil Paxton offers us a short piece in which he addresses a very timely concern: our tendency to be "for or against." In a very humble manner he shares his own struggle to overcome subtle prejudices and stereotyping.

What could be more ambiguous than sexuality? Marianist Fr. James Heft writes about sexuality and sublimation and the challenge of becoming an integrated person. From many years of personal experience with the challenges of celibacy and counseling students of college age, he offers much practical wisdom.

I included in this issue a short piece sent to me by a man incarcerated in one of our Michigan prisons. At the age of 15 he was sent to prison for second degree murder. After 20 years of incarceration, he has now come to peace with what he has done and has "found the Lord." He understands the ambiguity of his situation and has come to trust in the power of God's love for him and through him.

Finally, the issue closes with my "examen" on the theme of ambiguity from the perspective of the novel Silence by Endo and the related movie by Scorsese. Rather than writing a book review or a commentary on the movie, I developed certain themes present within the novel as they relate to the topic of ambiguity. In general the protagonist of the story, Fr. Sebastian Rodrigues, moves from a world of certitudes into a realm of great ambiguity; he has to learn to trust in the loving mercy of God for him and through him.

As always, our Scriptural passage offers a perspective on the entire issue. I chose a verse often overlooked which immediately follows St. Paul's familiar hymn about love: "At present we see indistinctly as in a mirror but then face to face. At present I know partially; then I shall know fully as I am fully known." This verse is an excellent summary of the reality of our lives. We see indistinctly; we have spiritual cataracts. We also see only part of any given situation and know and understand only certain aspects of our own personhood. We will fully "know" ourselves in the presence of the God of love. For now, we live with the ambiguity and the mystery of the "fine, thin line" between our lives in this realm and the fullness of life in the Communion of Saints.

More than any other issue, there is something for everyone in the pages that follow! They should make perfect Lenten reading!

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At present we see indistinctly as in a mirror, but then face to face. At present I know partially; then I shall know fully as I am fully known.

(I Corinthians 13:12)



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June 11, 2018 Guest House Annual Golf Classic Indianwood Golf & Country Club Lake Orion, MI July 8-14, 2018 ICAP Retreat for Women Religious Carmelite Spiritual Center Darien, IL

July 9-11, 2018 Annual Summer Leadership Conference Somerset Inn Troy, MI

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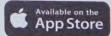


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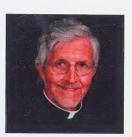
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INFORMATION FOR AUTHORS

The editors of Human Development are quite eager to publish articles that translate the latest research in psychology, health, medicine, and spirituality to ministry, formation and practice. Our hope is that Human Development will be known as the most user-friendly ministry publication. This will require making complicated theoretical knowledge, research, and concepts understandable and applicable to the personal and professional lives of our readers.

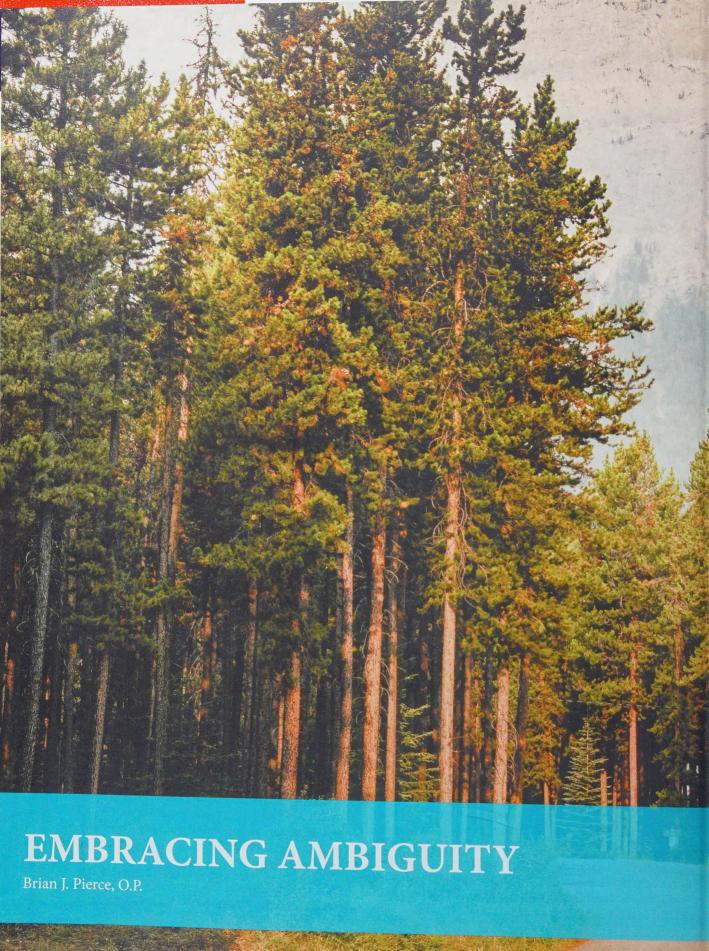
Since ministry is in a time of significant transition and change, we anticipate that the articles we publish will enlighten and positively influence the daily decisions and practices of those in Church leadership, ministry formation, spiritual direction, and counseling of any kind. There are also a number of previously under-appreciated forces that uniquely influence ministry and ministers: cultural, organizational, and situational factors. We intend to highlight and honor these factors in the pages of Human Development. Accordingly, we ask prospective authors to be mindful of these considerations in their manuscripts.

Manuscripts are received with the understanding that they have not been previously published and are not currently under consideration elsewhere. Feature articles should be limited to 4,500 words (15 double-spaced pages), with no more than six recommended citations and/or readings; filler items of between 500 and 1,000 words will be considered. All accepted material is subject to editing. When quoting sacred scripture, the New Revised Standard Version is preferred. All manuscripts are to be prepared according to the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (6th edition).

Letters are welcome and will be published as space permits and at the discretion of the editors. Such communications should not exceed 600 words and are subject to editing.

Authors are responsible for the completeness and accuracy of proper names in both text and Bibliography/suggested readings. Acknowledgments must be given when substantial material is quoted from other publications. Provide author name(s), title of article, title of journal or book, volume number, page(s), month and year, and publisher's permission to use material.

Manuscripts should be submitted to Msgr. John Zenz at editor@hdmag.org as an email attachment.





WE BEGIN WITH ONE OF THE GREAT AMERICAN POEMS, FROM ONE OF THE GREAT AMERICAN POETS, ROBERT FROST (1874-1963):

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, And sorry I could not travel both And be one traveler, long I stood And looked down one as far as I could To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair, And having perhaps the better claim, Because it was grassy and wanted wear; Though as for that the passing there Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay In leaves no step had trodden black. Oh, I kept the first for another day! Yet knowing how way leads on to way, I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh Somewhere ages and ages hence: Two roads diverged in a wood, and I— I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference.

TWO ROADS

Whether we like it or not, ambiguity is part of life. There is never just one road to choose from or one way to do something. There are usually at least two, or twenty ... or two hundred ways to get to where we are going. That's life. Options and choices, grey spaces and question marks are a part of everyday life. Life is ambiguous. Maybe ambiguity is one of the essential ingredients that makes life real, and colorful, and multi-dimensional, and yes, sometimes frustrating. As Robert Frost suggests, making choices in the midst of ambiguity is precisely what makes all the difference.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by...

The word 'ambiguity,' though rich and pregnant in meaning, is not so easy to define. The prefix 'amb' can mean a number of things: about, around, two, both. The second half of the word, 'bigere,' is also rather tricky to pin down. It seems to suggest 'wandering' in a rather indefinite way, or in two or more different ways at the same time. Ambiguity reminds us that life is multi-layered, 3-D, and complex – frequently leading us down several paths at the same time. The words and realities of life often have a double meaning, inviting us to befriend doubt and uncertainty as a normal part of life (easier said than done, as we all know!).

In a recent gathering of companions who meet from time to time to talk about our spiritual journeys, I was struck by a rather feisty comment made by one of them: "I have a high tolerance for ambiguity." Given that I had already begun to reflect on this article, his comment caught my attention immediately. "What do you mean by a 'high tolerance for ambiguity'?" I asked. His response was quick and caught me somewhat off guard: "I like to stir the pot."

Intrigued by his response, I commented that I personally prefer life to be more like a calm, clear pond than a stirred pot! I like to be able to see what is beneath the surface of the water before I jump into it. Looking into a dark nothingness, filled with mystery, is fine for a TV drama, but in real life I prefer having at least a tiny glimpse of what to expect before I make the plunge.

We all know, of course, that life is not always a placid, clear pond that allows us to see into the future with perfect clarity. Life comes with its built-in challenges, and in my experience clarity is a rather rare event. In the best of circumstances life is what St. Paul described as, "seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror" (2 Cor. 3:18). Is it not true that we find ourselves traveling more frequently on a narrow, dark road filled with uncertainty than on one lined with bright lights and wide, easy turns? I have learned over the years that life does not need much help from me for the pot to get stirred and the road to become dark. In fact, I am usually begging God to turn down the volume a bit on the ambiguity channel of life! Several years ago I attended a lecture given by Richard Rohr, OFM. Though I do not remember much about the talk, I scribbled down a sentence that I have never forgotten. The words he spoke that day live deep inside me. Rohr said, "The great heresy has been to turn faith's darkness into certitude. There is no wonder, no astonishment, no awe, no humility. There is no Mystery." Though life can be tough, I still long for the ambiguous glimpse of God's face than sugar-coated certainty.

RISKING THE LESS TRAVELED ROUTE

Instead of stirring the pot called ambiguity, I am usually praying for some stillness and clarity as I look ahead at the next phase of the journey. Discerning life's direction, choosing the right path, making the best decision ... It often feels to me like one of those television game shows where the contestants are racing against the buzzer! Logic does not always



help in such moments. Life has a way of leading us into the realm of mystery, paradox and uncertainty whether we like it or not. We are constantly faced with making choices from a long list, filled with complex 'pros' and 'cons.' Rarely is there just one right path. Could it be that ambiguity, though difficult and frustrating, is precisely one of the ingredients that gives deep meaning to life? Robert Frost seems to suggest that this might be true.

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference.

Frost seems to suggest that taking 'risks' is at the heart of a life lived fully. When was the last time we broke out of the pack, threw fear and concern aside, and set off on the less-traveled road? I am old enough to know that risks often lead to marvelous new insights into life and existence, and if that is true, then maybe we cannot really experience God's boundless love without them. And risks, at least the

ones I've had to face, almost always lead me into a struggle with ambiguity. We do not have to stir life's pot very much to discover the great mysteries of human existence. If we have our feet solidly on the ground, the pot is going to get stirred one way or another. It usually does not need much help from us.

Two roads diverged ... and I
I took the one less traveled by

Living with ambiguity will certainly be challenging, and in the best of situations, it can be invigorating, as well. And if Robert Frost is right, then being willing to set off on one of the less-traveled roads might just make all the difference.

I am quite certain that we have all encountered grace in those moments and places in life in which we have risked meandering into the luminous cloud of unknowing, ready to face life's mystery. The other choice, of course, is to live in a constant state of heightened caution and fear, and as most of us know,

that choice will almost certainly lead to a spiritual wasteland. Though Jesus never promised that it would be easy, he did say, "I am with you always..." (Mt. 28:20). Of course, not long after saying those words, he was stripped, beaten and crucified! That certainly threw a wrench into his followers' attempt to understand just what he meant when he said, "I am with you always." The disciples clearly thought that the cross was the end; the adventure was finished. It seemed clear that not only Jesus, but his promises, too, had died on the cross, or so they thought.

The cross, let us remember, is made of two intersecting poles, forming a kind of icon of contradiction. Isn't it true that life frequently manifests its power and vitality only after we have been willing to step into the dark mystery of paradox and contradiction? Anyone who has ever fallen in love certainly knows that truth! It is when we try to second-guess the journey that we usually end up suffocating the possibility of new life. In his poem, Robert Frost clearly suggests that his choice for the riskier, darker, less-traveled path is precisely what made all the difference.

The Jewish and Christian Scriptures are filled with risk-taking. There is hardly a page in the Bible that does not present some person's call to step out on a limb and risk everything in order to glimpse the face of God. Jacob's all night wrestling match with the angel of God (Gen. 32:22-32) is a powerful symbol of the spiritual journey. God's blessing is never far away, though frequently it is accompanied by some kind of existential wound as well. Radical discipleship is not for the faint of heart.

Ambiguity attests to e fact that there are always at least two paths, two roads, two ways to journey through life, and usually many more. Life is not black-and-white, nor is there any perfect path that will assure our arrival safely to our final destination. A religion that offers 'three asy steps to salvation' is a hoax. Certainty and faith are two completely different realities. Jesus never spoke about certainty. He did not wander through Galilee handing out fliers with a detailed three-step process for saving one's soul. Jesus just looked people in the eye and said, "Come and follow me." He was not afraid to invite us to risk everything in one crazy leap of faith.

Just look at humble Joseph of Nazareth – a simple craftsman, minding his own business in the quiet rhythm of manual labor. He and Mary had wonderful plans and hopes for the future. After all, they were in love! Joseph had no degree in philosophy or theology, but he was a good and righteous man (Mt. 1:19), when suddenly, out of nowhere, the angel Gabriel appeared on the scene and threw his simple life into a tailspin! Talk about a face-to-face encounter with ambiguity! "What? Did you say pregnant?"

Joseph never dreamed that his courtship with Mary could get so complicated so quickly. Suddenly, with no advance notice, the lights went out! I suspect that most of us would prefer to avoid having to struggle all night v ad's angel. After all, God always seems to v. spiritual battles, leaving us defeated and was , like poor 'ole Jacob after his wrestling match h the angel. When life gets tough, the tempta' often to find an easy way out, to seek a dist saying to ourselves, "OK,

Robert Frost clearly suggests that his choice for less-traveled path is precisely what made all the c

kier, darker, ence. then I'll just get another Masters degree, or buy a new I-Phone, or take a vacation. I've had enough of reality for now!" Living in a black-and-white world is so much easier than having to deal with life's many shades of grace. The truth, of course, is that life is hard and complicated, and it will eventually bring us to our knees. If we are paying attention, though, falling to our knees might not be such a bad place to be

In his poem, Robert Frost tells us that he took the road less traveled, and that it made all the difference. That is no minor detail in the busy and complex world that we live in today. It is not easy to navigate the road that has fewer signposts along the way. And to complicate things, there is a lot of pressure in our world today to march to the drumbeat of the majority, to stay on the brightly lighted super highway.

Embracing ambiguity often leads us into uncertainty, loneliness and darkness. When the pot called 'life' gets stirred up, and the path that once was clear suddenly seems to be overgrown with weeds, we have no choice but to put one foot in front of the other and pray for the gift of wisdom.

THE AMAZING GRACE OF INCOMPLETENESS

In his ground-breaking book, *Addiction and Grace*, Gerald May, M.D., psychiatrist, spiritual director and founder of the Shalem Institute in Washington, DC, says the following:

Although God calls us all toward a more perfect life, we cannot personally achieve the state of perfection. We can and should do our very best to move in that direction, struggling with every resource we have, but we must also accept the reality of our incompleteness. Second, we need to recognize that the incompleteness within us, our personal insufficiency, does not make us unacceptable

in God's eyes. Far from it; our incompleteness is the empty side of our longing for God and for love. It is what draws us toward God and one another. If we do not fill our minds with guilt and self-recriminations, we will recognize our incompleteness as a kind of spaciousness into which we can welcome the flow of grace. We can think of our inadequacies as terrible defects, if we want, and hate ourselves. But we can also think of them affirmatively, as doorways through which the power of grace can enter our lives. Then we may begin to appreciate our inherent, God-given lovableness. (p. 31)

Gerald May's ability to weave the words 'incompleteness' and 'spaciousness' into the same sentence is remarkable and rings as deeply true, almost mystical. My guess, though, is that our contemporary society, with all its scientific creativity and unbelievable capacity for innovation, would find the word 'incompleteness' a bit old-fashioned, almost heretical. Our times are focused on filling up the empty spaces of life, proving away the mysteries, tossing out yesterday's wisdom because there is a new on-line version today. Silence and mindfulness have been hijacked by nonstop talk radio and the self-hypnosis of hand-held devices.

How will we ever experience the wise truth that incompleteness is what draws us toward God and one another if we never give ourselves permission to experience it? Our world is obsessed with filling itself up with stuff. Could it be that addiction is rooted in our fear of silence, spaciousness and poverty of spirit? Are we running from the very truth that has the capacity to set us free?

As we walk our journey, trying to live by faith, and suddenly discover that two separate paths have appeared before us where we thought there was just one, my guess is that most of us do not think twice:



we choose the well-worn path. And why not? It is, after all, broad and well lit by bright neon signs and arrows pointing the way. Why would anyone ever take the less travelled path, fraught with weeds and brambles?

A few years ago my Australian friends, Peter and Carmel, and I walked the Portuguese Camino to Santiago. It was a marvelous experience that required both flexibility and present-moment attentiveness each day. There were often forks in the road that required quick discernment. Sometimes that discernment spared us some unnecessary hard work, and then there were other times that the opposite happened, as well. More than once we took a fork in the road that, though adding an extra mile or two onto the journey, ended up being a spectacular detour, filled with unexpected surprises.

I think that my two friends and I would agree that one of the most grace filled experiences of the entire Camino happened when we wandered off the beaten path one day, thanks to the advice of a joyful young pilgrim who was hiking in the opposite direction. We met Kevin at a pilgrim hostel, and as happens on the Camino, we ended up sharing some of our

experiences. The previous day Kevin had taken a detour from the Camino map because someone had told him about a wonderful pilgrim hostel run by a young Portuguese family. "Trust me," he said, as he pointed to a fork in the road on his worn and wrinkled map, "You will not be sorry if you take this detour tomorrow. Though it will add a bit to your walking, I promise that you will not regret it."

Well, that day we chose to be obedient to the grace of the present moment, and as those kind of spontaneous encounters go, Kevin was absolutely right. The less-travelled path ended up being one of the greatest graces of the Camino. The evening that we spent with the Portuguese host family that welcomed us into their home was unbelievable. There were four or five other pilgrims who had also followed the promptings of the Spirit that day just as we did. That evening at 'Casa Fernanda' will always be one of the great parables of grace in my life. The meal shared with strangers and friends around a large table was as palpable an experience of the Last Supper as any other that I've had. Grace flowed that evening as bountifully as did the homemade Portuguese wine that we shared! I have no doubt that Jesus and his disciples were seated right there with us.

CONSECRATING OUR VULNERABILITY: THE ULTIMATE "WAY"

As mentioned earlier, the prefix 'amb' in the word ambiguity,' denotes 'two' or 'both.' There is never just one path, one way to make the journey called life. There are many. Some lead to life and joy and others to sadness and despair. No two paths are the same. For this reason, the journey requires discernment and attentiveness. If we say 'yes' to this walk in faith, willing to enter into the realm of the unknown, we will very likely have an encounter with grace, and we might witness our world being turned upside down, too. Sometimes the Way makes sense and very often it does not. No matter what happens, though, God is never far away.

When Jesus called that first rag-tag group of fishermen to be his disciples, he offered them no information, no map, no salary and no security. Imagine that happening today! Jesus' simple phrase, "Come and follow me," in case we have not noticed, does not end with a question mark. Jesus was not inviting them to a Christmas party, with an RSVP attached. The 'journey of faith' is not a game of monopoly; it is more akin to walking a labyrinth in the dark, filled with the promise of eternal joy! If we let the mystery of walking in faith paralyze us even before we set off, then we are truly lost. We can only experience the grandeur and beauty of God if we are willing to risk, letting our hearts be stretched as wide and free as God's own heart.

When Jesus told the parable of the prodigal son (Lk. 15:11-32), he opened a rather messy can of worms. The people who heard it for the first time would have been terribly scandalized. After all, that a son would request his father's inheritance while his father was still alive would have brought public shame upon the family. The neighbors would have judged the son's actions as wishing that his father were dead. Why does Jesus tell such a parable?

The key that unlocks this radical parable of God's grace is hidden in the heart of the father, who was astoundingly free, with a heart as expansive as God's own heart. He was not pinned in by custom and courtesy, nor could his actions be confined inside a box of cultural do's and don'ts. In telling the parable, Jesus invites us to the edge of a great precipice of freedom and faith. Ambiguity can leave us paralyzed unless it is accompanied by a freedom rooted in the Spirit. Jesus tells this parable to teach us something about radical discipleship and freedom,

and he does so by letting us glimpse the expansive, unconventional love of his own Abba's heart.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son, as we know, ends with the father running through the village with his tunic pulled up around his waist in a scandalous expression of love for his wayward son, who has suddenly appeared tired and tattered at the edge of town. Scripture scholar, Kenneth Bailey, tells us that Middle Easterners, wearing long robes, would never run in public, as it would bring shame and ridicule upon the entire family. Why, then, does Jesus tell us a parable of a merciful father who humiliates himself before an entire village because of love? Is he trying to teach us something about the radical love of God? Some people, of course, reject the 'cheap love' of the father. They tend to prefer a domesticated version of the gospel, with the rules chiseled neatly into stone.

The path of discipleship, though, is not a paved sidewalk with neon arrows pointing out the way. It is a treacherous journey of faith, a cross pointing in four different directions at the same time. Discipleship is supposed to confound us into conversion. Ask Saul of Tarsus! He who thought that he knew everything there was to know about God suddenly found himself plunged into a world of darkness, being led like a child to a place he did not know.

Getting lost on the path of discipleship is normal, and often it can be liberating. It happens to the best of us. The Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, a truly great modern spiritual master, has written one of the simplest, yet most profound modern prayers about embracing ambiguity and darkness on the journey of faith.

Ambiguity can leave us paralyzed unless it is accompanied by a freedom rooted in the Spirit.

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone." (Thoughts in Solitude p. 89)

Merton clearly suggests that not knowing where he was going was one of the profound and saving graces of his contemplative life. Life's unsolicited trio of ambiguity, paradox and the dark night frequently wreaks havoc along the spiritual journey, but for Merton and the great mystics the darkness comes as a grace, enabling them (and hopefully us, as well) to embrace the mystery of true inner freedom, what Gerald May calls spaciousness. I will let May describe it for himself:

Every [spiritual] struggle, no matter how small, and no matter what our spiritual interest may be, will include at least brief encounters with spaciousness. Through the spaciousness will come some homeward call, some invitation to transformation. If we answer yes, even with the tiniest and most timid voice, our struggle becomes consecrated. Consecration means dedication to God. It occurs when we claim our deepest desire for God, beneath, above, and beyond all other things ... In the beginning, we will not understand the full meaning of consecration ... Nor will we comprehend the ups and downs, the joys

and agonies of the journey that must follow. And certainly we will be unable to grasp the overarching cosmic meaning of our small assent, the joy it gives to God, the deepening love it will bring to humanity, the universal covenant it has enriched. We may not have any idea that consecration means encounter with spaciousness. But our yes comes from some taste, some bare recollection of all these things. We know it has something to do with home. There is love in it and hope. We feel a small breeze of freedom. And in the tiny space our hearts can say yes. (pp. 149-50)

Once we have spoken our 'yes' aloud, the path of faith becomes consecrated, enabling us to embrace the ambiguity and mystery of God's grace hidden in everyday life. We are not given the answers to life's mysteries. In fact, consecration rarely comes accompanied by certainty. But we are freed from the pressure of having to know all the answers. We learn to navigate the grey spaces with mindfulness.

Life is never perfect, nor is it static. It is akin to a river that changes by the minute. Many of us may remember the film that appeared years ago, entitled "A River Runs Through It." It ends with these words: "Eventually all things merge into one, and a river runs through it." Is it not true that the river of life that bursts forth from the heart of God is racing through our fragile being, as well, carrying in its waters the wonderful mysteries of life? Consecration happens when we say 'yes' to the mystery, allowing ourselves to be carried along in the great flow called life. Being free enough to ask the difficult questions, while embracing ambiguity along the way, is what I think Gerald May is pointing to when he speaks of spaciousness.

Though he does not use the word ambiguity itself, I find in this marvelous quote from the Irish poet, David Whyte, a powerful invitation to leap with utter abandon into the ambiguous mysteries of life:



Vulnerability is not a weakness, a passing indisposition, or something we can arrange to do without, vulnerability is not a choice, vulnerability is the underlying, ever present and abiding undercurrent of our natural state. To run from vulnerability is to run from the essence of our nature ... The only choice we have as we mature is how we inhabit our vulnerability, how we become larger and more courageous and more compassionate through our intimacy with disappearance. Our choice is to inhabit vulnerability as generous citizens of loss, robustly and fully, or conversely, as misers and complainers, reluctant, and fearful ... never walking fully through the door. (Onbeing Studios – source online)

"The only choice we have as we mature is how we inhabit our vulnerability." David Whyte, like Gerald May, is inviting us to step into the land called 'freedom.' Spaciousness is freedom; it is the nner sanctuary where we learn to embrace our vulnerability and 'unfinishedness.' Is it not true that we can embrace our friend 'ambiguity' only if

we are willing to embrace our other friend, named 'unfinishedness?' As one elderly gentleman said to me some years ago, summing up his life up to that point: "God ain't finished with me yet."

CONCLUSION: MAKE MUSIC AS YOU ARE

I end with a story about a man who was unafraid to embrace ambiguity and ever-so-ready to step wholeheartedly into his own unfinishedness.

On November 18, 1995, Itzhak Perlman, the world-renowned violinist, performed a concert at Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center in New York City. Itzhak was stricken with polio as a child; he has braces on both legs and has to use two crutches to help him walk, so it is quite a chore for him to come onto a stage. Barely had he started his concert when one of the strings on his violin broke. The snap was so loud, there was no mistake among the audience as to what happened. Instead of the arduous task of leaving the stage to change the broken string or get another violin, Itzhak waited a moment, closed his eyes and then signaled the conductor to begin again.

The orchestra began, and he played from where he had left off ... with such passion and such power and such purity as they had never heard before. Of course, anyone knows that it is impossible to play a symphonic work with just three strings. I know that, and you know that, but that night Itzhak Perlman refused to know that. You could see him modulating, changing, recomposing the piece in his head....

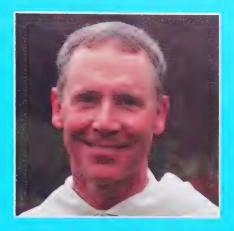
When he finished, there was an awesome silence in the room. And then people rose and cheered. There was an extraordinary outburst of applause from every corner of the auditorium. We were all on our feet, screaming and cheering; doing everything we could to show how much we appreciated what he had done. He smiled, wiped the sweat from this brow, raised his bow to quiet us, and then he said, not boastfully, but in a quiet, pensive, reverent tone, 'You know, sometimes it is the artist's task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left.

I say, "Let's keep making music!"



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

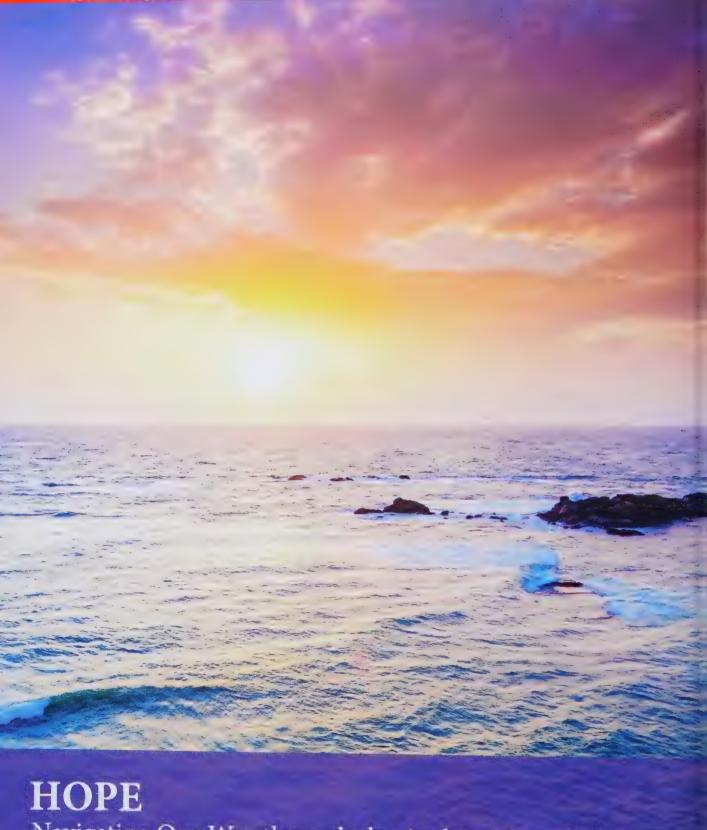
- With a reference to Robert Frost's poem. Fr. Pierce suggests that "taking risks" can be identified with the "road less traveled." The more frequently chosen route seems to be the path of apparent security, clarity caution all types intended to avoid "pain." Do you agree with his analysis of Frost's two paths? What path have you chosen and why? (Think in particular of times you have taken the risk of self-sacrificing love.)
- Fr. Pierce cites the thoughts of Dr. Gerald May that our own sense of "incompleteness" can indeed be a blessing for it creates "space for grace." Have I found that to be true in my own life experience and in my ministry accompanying others through their frustrations with perceived personal faults or failings?
- Gerald May explains that the way to live peacefully with ambiguity comes as we choose to consecrate our vulnerabilities to God. The Irish poet David Whyte takes this even further and suggests vulnerability is the essence of being human; we must embrace it. Can I think of times I have actually embraced ambiguity as a "friend?"



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

the Southern Dominican Province of St.
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He has written three books in English
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Spanish preaching manual entitled, Proxis y
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Navigating Our Way through the Ambiguities of Life Paul J. Wadell



WHERE IS HOPE?

After teaching theology for more than thirty years, I know that certain topics will immediately get students' attention. Lately, hope is on their minds; not because they feel an abundance of it, but because they sense it quietly slipping away. Hope's absence worries them; its uncertainty troubles them. And who can blame them? Last semester we had to address two mass. shootings, the first at an outdoor concert in Las Vegas, the second at a small Baptist church in Texas on a Sunday morning where a community of the baptized gathered to give thanks to God. Each time the students noted that what most unsettles them is that these massacres, though undeniably horrifying, no longer surprise them. Mass killings, along with global acts of terrorism, have become the background landscape of their lives.

But such tragic acts of violence are not the only thing that assaults their hope. Like many of us, they are fed up with political leaders obsessed with thwarting the opposition, who appeal to the worst instincts of people, and who are so beholden to special interest groups that they have stopped even pretending to be concerned about the common good. Add to this the now almost daily revelations of sexual harassment and abuse, the widening gap between the incredibly wealthy and everyone else, and ominous warnings about the effects of climate change over the next several decades, and it is no wonder that students would be anxious about the future their elders have prepared for them.

My students are hardly alone. We all know people and maybe we are among them—whose hearts feel little warmth of hope but instead the creeping chill of despair. We encounter these people in the workplace. We find them in our churches. We may even live with them. They hunger for reasons to hope, reasons to believe that despite all the challenges, struggles, difficulties, and disappointments that may come our way, life is nonetheless good, blessed and promising. They desperately want to live with the joyful confidence that characterizes hope but, given the discord that marks our society (and sometimes even our churches), given wars that never end as well as the growing threat of nuclear conflict, and given all the problems for which there is neither the will nor the moral imagination needed to resolve them, it is not surprising that they cannot see a way forward in the darkness. Many people today feel helpless and, therefore, hopeless, whether they are thinking about the world, our country, or their personal lives. For some, it is not just that they've lost some sense of purpose and meaning in their lives; they begin to wonder if there is any purpose and meaning at all.

In an age of anxiety, fragmentation, and increasing ambiguity, they may appear cheerful and friendly on the outside, but interiorly any sense of life as promising is quietly vanishing.

HOPE MORE RESILIENT THAN OPTIMISM

Paradoxically, as is so often true with many other aspects of our lives, we recognize the preciousness of hope precisely as we feel it slipping away. Hope speaks to our hearts because we know we cannot live without it and because we never feel we have enough of it. Life is hard, sometimes unbearably so, but hope is the knowledge that even when life is difficult, it can be lived in a meaningful way. This is what makes hope the antithesis of optimism. Optimism is the feeling that arises when nothing could possibly be better, when there are no clouds on the horizon, when everything comes easily, and where each day is equally uplifting. Optimism is the natural emotional high we experience when we feel far more in control of our lives than we ever actually are, when all our weaknesses magically disappear and all our struggles kindly slip away, and where everything in the world seems appropriately designed to please us.

But optimism is also the cheap grace that flees at the first sign of trouble, which is why we should never trust it and especially why we should never confuse it with hope. Hope is far more resilient than optimism because hope is a virtue, a way of being and acting. By contrast, optimism is an emotion that can disappear as quickly as it arrived. As optimism crumbles when confronted with adversity and ambiguity, hope enables us not only to live with adversity and ambiguity, but also to work through them.

If optimism surfaces when everything goes smoothly for us, hope emerges precisely when things are dark.

Paradoxically, as is so often true with many other aspects of our lives, we recognize the preciousness of hope precisely as we feel it slipping away.



Hope makes itself known when things look bleak, when there are so many clouds that it always seems ike night, and when we recognize that for the time being all we can do is to be patient and endure. Hope s about struggle and perseverance, about not giving up when we not only feel like we are drowning, but are convinced someone or something is holding us lown. Unlike cheerful optimists, people of hope know that oftentimes there is no quick solution or no easy way out. They accept that there are times when we have to find our way in the darkness while till believing in the light. Perhaps most importantly, people of hope, instead of giving up on what is best nd most promising, steadfastly pursue what is ight and good even when doing so is difficult and specially when others have forsaken hope for the asy path of cynicism. Unlike cynics, people of hope ccept all the responsibilities that come with being dult human beings fully engaged with life.

HOPE, A VIRTUE FOR WAYFARERS

Moreover, people of hope, unlike both optimists and cynics, recognize that to be human is to be on our way, to be stretched between a past we never completely leave behind and a future we aspire to but which is always beyond our grasp. The philosopher Josef Pieper called this our status viatoris, the "condition or state of being on the way," and said it was the "innermost core" of what it means to be creatures born in time. For Pieper, it is precisely the inescapable temporal character of our existence that makes hope such an absolutely crucial virtue. Hope connects our past and our present to the future because hope orients our lives to a fullness and completion we yearn for, but cannot at this moment completely enjoy. It is this tension between the "not yet" of the present and the promise of the future; between our orientation toward fulfillment and our imperfect possession of it, that makes hope necessary. So it is that Pieper defined hope as "the virtue of the *status viatoris*; it is the proper virtue of the 'not yet."

What Pieper described all of us know to be true: we are wayfarers on a journey, pilgrims making our way through life. As we make our way, many things pull us off course, distract us, and even tempt us to abandon the journey completely. Those temptations can come from the sorrows and sufferings that afflict countless people across the world. They can come when we work diligently for something we believe in but, alas, nothing seems to change. Or they can come when we struggle with weaknesses we thought we had left behind, only to have them reappear, stronger than ever. At such moments, hope not only steadies us, but also focuses us on what is best, lest disillusionment and discouragement rob us of the joy promised us by God.

The fact that hope asserts itself at exactly those moments when it is almost impossible to hold on to it tells us that human beings have a natural propensity for hope. Hope is our natural condition, not despair. This does not mean that sustaining hope is easy, but it does mean that hope corresponds to

There is in all of us a natural gravitation to life and, therefore, to hope.

the innermost truth of our being. Despair, not hope, is the lie. If, as the Book of Wisdom says, "God fashioned all things that they might have being" (1:14), then despite the temptation to despair and the seductions of cynicism, the truest law of our being is our deep and abiding inclination to life. The fact that this almost indelible desire to live manifests itself when we are most tempted to give up tells us that we cannot ultimately silence the most fundamental truth of our nature: God wants us to live; not merely to survive, but to flourish. We may deny this truth, repress it, and live in foolish contradiction to it, but we cannot wash it out of our lives.

As Pieper observed, "The 'way' of homo viator... leads toward being and away from nothingness; it leads to realization, not to annihilation..." Despite the hardships and tribulations of life—and despite how bleak and unpromising both the present and the future can sometimes appear—there is in all of us a natural gravitation to life and, therefore, to hope. No matter how tempting or persuasive, despair is an unnatural condition; it perversely violates who we really are and what we really want. Despairing is not just stoic resignation; rather, it is the self-destructive contradiction of the deepest truth of our being.

COMPONENTS OF HOPE

How then should we think about hope? And why should we be hopeful? The thirteenth century theologian St. Thomas Aquinas can help us answer these questions. Aquinas identified three components of hope. First, he said that hope concerns something good that we desire but do not yet have. If we already had what we want, there would be no need to hope for it. Hope always concerns a future good. We begin to hope as soon as we realize there is something we want, but do not yet possess. This is why there is always a "not yet" quality to hope and why genuine hope always leads to action. Hope stretches us. It moves us beyond where we are to where we want to be because hope turns us toward something good and inspires us to pursue it.

We can begin to see why hope is such an essential virtue for life. If we did not hope for anything, we would not move; we would never begin to act. Because of hope, we engage life. Through hope, we set goals and purposes for our lives and strive to achieve them. Bluntly put, hope gets us out of bed in the morning while despair convinces us to stay there. Without hope, our lives shut down.

Second, Aquinas claimed that the "something good" to which hope aspires is "difficult but possible to attain." There is no need to hope if we can easily attain what we want, whether a new job, a healthy relationship, peace in our families, or life everlasting with God and the saints. But neither is there any reason to hope if we know that what we want is completely impossible to achieve; something that may be undeniably good, but will remain forever unreachable. For example, it would make no sense for me to tell my wife that what I really hope for this evening is a dish of ice cream, because in order to make good on that hope all I need to do is walk a few steps to the freezer. Hope is not necessary when what we want is easily within our grasp. On the other hand, it would equally make absolutely no sense for me to announce that I hope to teach calculus next semester. That would be a reasonable hope for some people, but not for someone whose last math course was in his first year of high school and whose anxiety dreams are regularly about math.

Thus, hope begins with the judgment that a future



cood may not be quickly or easily attained, but is conetheless possible. Hope reminds us that we will ave to work to reach that on which we have set our lights; despite whatever setbacks and difficulties we have encounter, we believe we can succeed. But if, from the start, we are convinced that no matter how ard we try or how long we persevere we will fail, hen even if what we desire is something genuinely cood, instead of turning toward it in hope, we would atturally pull away. If there is no hope in achieving that we desire, why even try?

his is why the third component of hope is so rucial. Aquinas finishes his description of hope by aying that the difficult good for which hope aims an be attained in two ways: either through our wn efforts or with the help of others. As soon as e adds "with the help of others," Aquinas opens up ope's possibilities by reassuring us that we do not ave to limit the scope of our hope only to those usings that we can secure by ourselves. If what we can hope for extends no further than what we might

be able to achieve by ourselves, then our hopes will understandably be rather limited. But if we can rely on others to help us accomplish what we cannot do on our own, the horizons of our hope become more expansive and more promising. As Aquinas reminds us, we are much more inclined to be hopeful "when we have friends on whom we can rely." Thus, the more people we are willing to trust to help us achieve our goal the greater can be the object of our hope and our confidence in reaching it.

Aquinas's insight reminds us that hope is not a solitary virtue: we never hope alone; rather, we always hope *together*. We need companions in hope, people who stand by us and refuse to abandon us when we are weighed down by the ambiguities and uncertainties of life. This is why hope requires friendships and healthy communities, and is largely impossible without them. More often than not, hope is not something we give ourselves. If we are struggling in life and feel everything falling apart, it is difficult to find within ourselves reasons for hope.



But sometimes friends can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. This is why Aquinas noted that we are less likely to get lost on a journey when a friend accompanies us on our way. He knew the journey of life would be too challenging, too arduous, and sometimes too overwhelming for any of us to accomplish individually. He knew that along the way there would be times when life would throw at us more than we could ever handle, times when we would feel lost, beaten down, and exhausted; without friends and communities to steady and support us, we could not possibly finish the journey.

Anyone anywhere who has felt hope slipping away knows this is true. We will lose our way if there are not others journeying with us who remind us of where we are going, why the journey matters, and

why we should never give up no matter how desolate and bleak the path before us may appear. These companions in hope keep us from getting snared by desolation and dejection. They protect us from the lonesome bog of despair. Most of all, they remind us that we need not and cannot sustain hope by ourselves because hope is a shared virtue; hope is a partnership. This is why it is good for us to reflect on who have been our companions in hope, to thank them, and then to consider how we might be called to be companions in hope for others.

THE DISTINCTIVE CHARACTER OF **CHRISTIAN HOPE**

For Christians, the horizons of hope are dramatically expanded because when Aquinas speaks of help

from reliable friends, ultimately he has God in mind. Like any friend, God loves us and wants our good. Like any friend, God desires our happiness and seeks what is best for us. But the good that God wants for us is the richest and most fulfilling of all, namely, everlasting life with God and the saints. Even though hope is a virtue, it is not something we can give ourselves, much less something we can achieve through hard work and gritty determination. Hope is a *gift*, the gift God gives us so that we can turn our lives to Him, seek Him, grow in His love and goodness, and someday know the happiness of being perfectly one with God.

Christian hope both begins and ends in a gift because it is the gift of God's very life, goodness, and love within us that enables us to hope for a joy, peace, and fulfillment that utterly transcend anything we could ever give ourselves. This is exactly what Paul meant when he declared that "hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." (Rom 5:5) and it is what Aquinas meant when he said that hope is specifically a theological virtue because it is infused in us by God and directly concerns God. In short, for Christians, God is both the object of our hope and the means to attain it. God not only is what we hope for, but also, through grace, Christ, the Spirit, and the sacraments, provides every help we need to achieve our highest possible good. Christian hope reaches for the only good capable of healing, restoring, and fulfilling us, and, as both Paul and Aquinas assure us, it is a good we have already, however incompletely, received. Hope is the divine gift out of which we live, the unassailable grace that both anchors and sustains us through the ambiguities, complexities, and tribulations of life.

Our hope should never be timid or tame. Christian hope is inherently audacious because the scope of Christian hope is not determined by our own power, resources, or ingenuity, but by God's unceasing love and incomparable goodness. There is a boldness to Christian hope because the horizon of Christian hope is not limited to the happiness and fulfillment

we can find in this world, but with the happiness and fulfillment that come from everlasting communion with God. Christians should never be anything other than daring with hope because they are convinced that the absolutely best thing they can hope for is the very thing God wants to give them. Consequently, as Aquinas insisted, we grasp the true nature of hope only when we "hope for nothing less from God" than God's very self.

Viewed from this perspective, perhaps it is better not to say that we live in a time of diminished hope, but rather, in an age of misdirected hope. Maybe we feel hope slipping away because we have replaced genuine hope—and ultimately the only true hope with counterfeit hopes, weak substitutes that will inevitably betray the trust we have placed in them because they cannot possibly give us what our souls and spirits truly seek. The problem is not that we hope for too much, but that we have learned to hope for so little. We have needlessly shrunk the horizons of hope by losing sight of its transcendent dimension. The greatness of our hope will always be in proportion to the greatness of the good on which we have set our hearts. Thus, maybe what most threatens hope today are not the tragedies and calamities and sufferings that regularly unfold across the world—or the ambiguities that often beset us but the soft, subtle, and sometimes unrecognizable despair we settle into when we slip into ways of thinking and living that rob us of the hope God wants for us. If this is true, we have to ask: Am I aspiring to something sufficiently good, sufficiently blessed and promising, to sustain me in the life God wants for me? Have I set my heart on something so immeasurably good that God will be able to bless me in the way God wants?

A JOURNEY OF HOPE

As the theologian David Elliot emphasizes, Christian hope hinges on remembering who we are, what we are about, and where we are going. Who are we? We are pilgrims on a journey to God. What are we about? We are about making our way to God and

helping others make their way as well by the love, kindness, compassion, and support we extend to them. Where are we going? We are headed to the great feast that Jesus called the reign of God, the heavenly banquet where together we rejoice in the presence of God and love one another as we do so. Hope guides us on the journey by keeping us focused on the feast.

The Christian life is an itinerary of hope that begins with Baptism, the sacrament that incorporates us into the story of God. It is unabashedly a story of hope because, thanks to the Death-Resurrection of Jesus, the central message of the story is that while death cannot be avoided, love is stronger. Death is real. So is suffering, loss, and failure, but none of these finally triumph because, in the Death-Resurrection of Jesus, God overcame all the things that assail hope and lure us to despair. As Pope Francis has noted, "Christ's resurrection is not an event of the past," but continues to permeate and transform the world. "Where all seems to be dead," Francis wrote, "signs of the resurrection suddenly spring up....However dark things are, goodness always re-emerges and spreads."

So it is that despite the ambiguity and fragility of life, we can live in hope and joy. The narrative of God's love and redemption, from which we live and which we are called to pass on to others, testifies that in God we find a love powerful, faithful, merciful, and resilient enough to bring things to life not just once, but again and again. We abide in joy and hope, never in fear, anxiety, sadness or despair, because we live in and from a love that all the forces of evil and death cannot overcome. Anyone who takes this truth to heart knows that to live in hope is not a farfetched and fanciful fantasy, but rather means abiding in deep harmony with reality, a reality determined not by sin and all the destructive forces that tear things apart, but by the healing and unifying power of God's love.

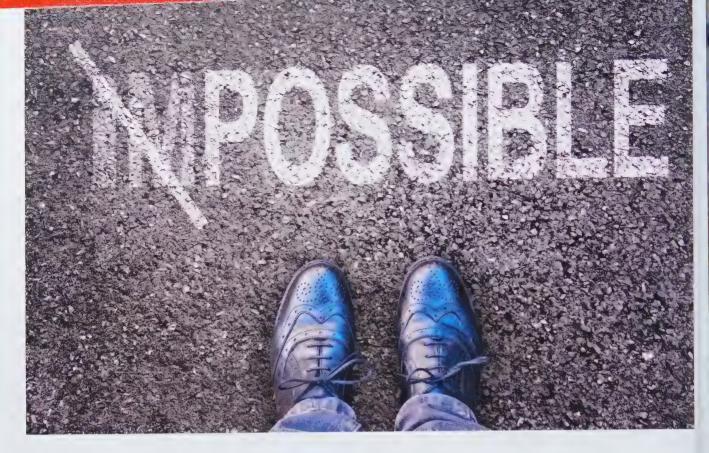
It is in light of this that we can understand why Aquinas called despair (rather than hatred, which opposes love, or disbelief, which opposes faith) the greatest sin. If to sin is to act against our own good, there is no more deadly way to do so than by despair. As the theologian Charles Pinches has observed, despair removes us from God's story of love and forgiveness. As he puts it, "Despair does not so much deny or oppose God's truth or story directly, but rather says: whatever the truth is, or whatever the story may be, there is nothing in it for me." If we remove ourselves from God's story, we are truly lost. If hope is a path to walk in, to abandon that path is to fall into the abyss of despair because it is to relinquish the only true power we have for navigating our way through the trials and tribulations, the ambiguities and uncertainties of life. Thus, it is not surprising, Aquinas lamented, that when people lose hope they more readily turn to sin. If nothing truly matters and if there is nothing we can do to overcome all the destructive forces of life, why not do whatever we want?

GOD'S GIFT NEEDS CULTIVATION

Hope is God's gift to us. But it is also a virtue, and that means hope has to be cultivated and practiced if it is not to shrivel and die. How can we strengthen the hope that God has entrusted to us? How can we be practitioners of hope—even living sacraments of hope—in a world that hungers for it yet doubts its existence? How can we develop "habits of hope" while unlearning habits of hopelessness? Perhaps the best thing to remember is that because hope is a virtue, hope is also a task. Hope is not a fleeting emotion; it is a way of life sustained by certain attitudes and practices. Hope always leads to mission.

How does hope commission us? In Spe Salvi, his 2007 encyclical on hope, Pope Benedict XVI wrote: "All serious and upright human conduct is hope in action." That statement suggests that hope is not only God's gift to us, but is also a calling. We are called to





be ministers of hope to others, which is something we can do every day in the ordinary circumstances of our lives. We minister hope when we commit ourselves to doing good in all the beautiful ways possible; even the smallest act of goodness is "hope in action." We minister hope through acts of kindness and compassion. We minister hope when we touch the heart of another human being with love. We minister hope when we encourage and support others, help them along their way, and affirm the goodness in them that they may not yet see in themselves. We minister hope when we take time to listen and to console, and when we receive another's attentiveness to us as a gift. Hope is the only power we have to ward off the dangerous malaise of despair, and it is a power that each of us can practice every day. Pope Francis captured well the indomitable power of hope when he wrote in Laudato Si': "All it takes is one good person to restore hope!"

CONCLUSION

My students are right. There are many reasons to be discouraged, many reasons to lose heart. The tribulations of life are many and often the future can seem bleak and unpromising. But they are also right to ask for reasons to hope. What they yearn for is what many people hunger for today. In a time of fear, great anxiety, and growing ambiguity, we need dwelling places of hope - families, friendships, communities, and especially churches - who continually affirm that life, even when it is difficult, is blessed and promising. As St. Paul, no stranger to the challenge of hope, boldly proclaimed, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Rom 8:31)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Dr. Wadell reminds us of the paradox of hope: it instinctively and spontaneously rises up within us and among us precisely in situations of "darkness." Think back on your life and times of despair when all seemed most bleak: how did hope mysteriously emerge? In prayer? In the support of a listening friend?

Citing Josef Pieper on the fact that we are "beings on the way," Wadell makes the point that hope connects our past and present to the future; it orients us to a future of fullness. Indeed it is our natural condition. Do you agree that recognizing and accepting our "incompleteness" is actually the threshold to greater peace amid the ambiguities and uncertainties of life?

The author notes that hope is a "social" virtue; we do not hope in isolation but find reason for hope through the support of others. Think of people who have been "ministers" of hope for you; pray for them with gratitude and perhaps let them know of their significance in your life. Consider also people for whom you are privileged to be the "bearer" of hope; thank God for that opportunity.

Wadell suggests that we live in a time of "misdirected" hope inasmuch as many have "removed" themselves – consciously or unconsciously – from God's story of salvation. Essentially, he says, "No God, no genuine hope." Do you agree? How might we apply that insight as we minister to and with people who live with deep despair?

Hope is a gift of the Holy Spirit. But every gift brings with it certain responsibilities. How could I deepen my own sense of hope? How might I encourage and "expand" the hope present in the hearts of those with whom I live and labor?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul J. Wadell is Professor of Theology and Religious Studies at St. Norbert College in De Pere, Wisconsin. A native of Louisville, Kentucky, he received his Ph.D. in Christian ethics from the University of Notre Dame. His scholarly interests include the virtues, the role of friendship in the moral and spiritual life, and theologies of vocation. He is the author of several books and has published articles in both scholarly and popular journals. He has also given lectures and workshops throughout the United States as well as internationally.



THE BLESSED AMBIGUITY OF A SACRAMENTAL CHURCH

T. Derrick Witherington



AMBIGUITY: WHERE WE MEET GOD

As human beings, we are both be mediated. Every aspect of our its very nature, mediation includes Chauvet who has written extensively on mediation in sacramental theology. We will apply his insights in a pastoral way, specifically to the non-practicing parents should be welcomed for Baptism. By the end of the article, hopefully, you will see ambiguity as the very place where God meets us and where we are enabled to lead lives of peace and



LOUIS-MARIE CHAUVET

Born in 1942 in the Loire region of France, Chauvet was ordained as a priest in 1966 and pursued advanced studies at the *Institut Catholique de Paris* where he earned his doctorate in 1971. Since 1978, Chauvet has taught at the *Institut* while also maintaining an active pastoral ministry. Now retired from full-time teaching, he devotes time to pastoral ministry and writing.

As his seminary formation took place in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Chauvet was influenced by movements of change and renewal sweeping through the Church, especially as they reached fruition at the Second Vatican Council. During this period, Chauvet also was exposed to Heidegger's philosophy, as well as developments in linguistics, psychoanalysis, hermeneutics, anthropology, and the other human sciences.

This exposure, coupled with his active involvement with the Jesuit-run *Centre Sèvres*, led him to appropriate many insights from these disciplines into his theological method, an appropriation which can clearly be seen in his magnum opus, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*. In this work he underscores the mediated nature of our relationship with God, a mediation which makes use of the "human elements" of language and body. It is to this topic of mediation which we now turn, particularly as it relates to the sacraments being necessarily concrete and, therefore, *ambiguous*.

CHRISTIAN FAITH AS MEDIATED AND ECCLESIAL

All that is real is mediated, and this necessarily includes our relationship with God and the primary settings of such mediation are the *sacraments*. One principal way we come into a relationship with God, then, is through the mediations of the sacraments, mediations which are concrete, bodily, and "inscribed," normally within the institutional Church.

The sacraments themselves presuppose a *Church*; sacraments are celebrations and expressions of the Church. In fact, the Church is the "fundamental sacrament" and stands in the center between the Reign of Christ (which always exceeds it) and the world. The Church stands as sacrament or living sign of the Reign of Christ. Chauvet writes about "the paradox of Christian identity," that is, being true to our own particularity, while, at the same time, being faithful to God's reign which always exceeds our particularity. Even as Christians enter into well-defined groups and symbol systems, they must always be open to the universal. We are always "caught" between accomplished Redemption and its future fulfilment.

The Church is the sacrament of God precisely as it negotiates fidelity to sacramental/institutional particularity with fidelity to God's limitless *reign*. Such balancing does not come easily or naturally to human beings since we tend to be more comfortable with black and white 'objectivity,' firm lines, distinctions, and limitations. Thinking in dialectical terms of "either/or" is what Chauvet calls "the twofold permanent temptation for all Christians," namely, to think that either the Church coincides with the Reign, or, that one can have the Reign without a Church. Embracing either of these extremes would jeopardize the Church's role as a sacrament of the Reign of Christ.

REALITY: ALWAYS AT A DISTANCE

The always-mediated nature of the Christian faith means that the object of our faith, namely, the Christian God, remains always at a distance. This distance is not a vacuum, nor a cause for despair. The distance comes as a result of our being human beings, that is, linguistic beings. Following the French structuralist Émilie Benveniste, Chauvet notes that 'one cannot be a human being without language,' for 'in order to be able to 'invent' language, one must think of it; but in order to be able to think of it, one must already be in language." Language, then, is not an instrument we use but the very

milieu or setting in which we become genuine "subjects." We become subjects by coming into a meaningful relationship with reality, and the primary way in which we create this relationship is through language. In other words, reality is never present to us in a direct way, but becomes relatable only through our use of language by which we constructively mediate our relation with it. This pattern is true for all our relations, be they family or friends, or, indeed, with God.

RENOUNCING THE TEMPTATION TO HAVE ALL, TO BE ALL

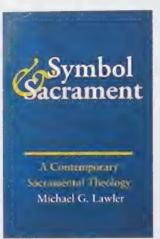
For Chauvet, in order to become truly human, we must renounce the urge to want to be everything and to have everything. We must also renounce the possibility of having everything exactly when we want it. Renunciation - never fully achieved or achievable - requires a life-long process of letting go and coming gradually to true freedom.

To minimize these mediations, or to claim to somehow bypass them in the name of a kind of 'pure experience,' is to be the victim of our own neurosis, a regression to the stage of the narcissistic child who conceives herself as the center of the universe with no necessary relationship to difference. Nevertheless, Chauvet acknowledges that the work of getting over our primary narcissism is a work which is ongoing the narcissistic child within each of us keeps coming back.

We are compelled to control our desire for firm foundations, learning instead to inhabit the creative and tensive space opened up through an engagement with difference. This whole endeavor is an ongoing project rather than an object or a destination, therefore we can say that we exist in a permanent becoming, in a never-finished process of letting go of the drive for attachment, learning to accept difference and separation.

The question before us is how the Church can be the privileged place for human beings to come

into a relationship with God, the "space" between particularity to Tradition and the universality of Christ's Reign. In order to answer this question, it would be helpful to visit one of Chauvet's more pastoral writings which deals with the Sacrament of Baptism. Particularly, this text addresses the struggle of reconciling a culturally conditioned request for a 'rite of passage' surrounding the birth of a new child with the Church's understanding of Baptism.



A PRACTICAL APPLICATION: BAPTIZING **CHILDREN FROM "UNCHURCHED" FAMILIES**

As a parish priest in a village just outside of Paris, as well as a theologian involved with the training of lay ministers on a diocesan level, Chauvet has come face-to-face with ambiguity surrounding the requests of people for the various ecclesial "rites of passage," particularly, Baptism. What priests and pastoral workers have found is a certain disconnect between "a request which is frequently for a rite of passage, of which the Church in our country [France] has always been the principal and traditional depository, and what is offered by the Church, which is a sacrament of faith." Through his pastoral experience, Chauvet knows that perhaps the two most popular responses to such a request are either to grant them in a mechanical and non-reflective way or else to reject them in the name of preserving 'the purity of the faith' from those who are supposedly not entitled to these rituals. Both of these responses, however, are incorrect because both of them fail to address the fact that the sacraments as well as the Church are

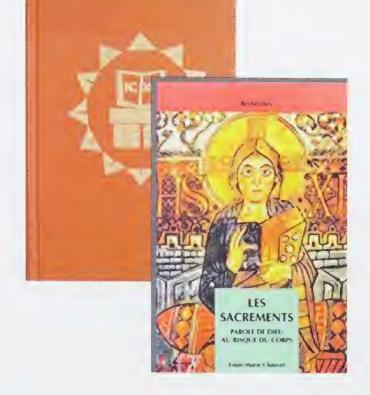
called to occupy tensive space opened by difference, a space which is situated in and through the various (and often messy) mediations which insert a certain level of ambiguity around the life of faith.

Based on his understanding of the always-mediated nature of the Christian faith, Chauvet sees the 'human' reasons of seeking for a 'rite of passage,' as genuinely theological reasons. For Chauvet, the Christian faith consists of both of these human or sociological factors as well as the fact of the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Indeed, the revelation of God in Christ comes only about through these human and sociological elements, and indeed 'faith does not come to destroy these elements, but rather she [faith] requires them.' In the sacraments, then, the Church has no other recourse than to rely on faith contained in 'earthen vessels,' which are never perfect, always partial, yet loved and redeemed by a gracious and merciful God. It is impossible to have recourse to a supposedly 'pure' faith that somehow manages to get around the ambiguity of human reason and desires, nor should we actually seek such a thing! After all, Christ himself became a human being: "Faith," in short, "does not reach its most high spirituality other than through the fragility, or even the ambiguity" of human mediations which are, by definition, less than perfect.

So what then is the appropriate response of the Church to such 'ambiguous' requests for the sacramental 'rites of passage,' and how does this response shed some light on how the Church can be seen as the privileged place of coming into a relationship with God, keeping in mind the constantly-tensive relationship between fidelity to what makes us particularly Christian as well as to the more universal presence of the Reign?

First of all, it should be pointed out that Chauvet sees a request for a sacramental rite of passage as

indeed, itself, part of the ritual and symbolic universe common to the Church, and to enter into



a sacramental rite is to willingly submit oneself to ritual and a symbolic universe. Indeed, when we become part of this ritual and symbolic universe we not only proclaim our faith in God as it exists now, but we also open ourselves to graced transformation in and through the God we worship and proclaim.

There is ultimately then a certain 'lowering of the threshold' with regard to who should be admitted to the sacramental rites of passage which requires only that those asking for these rites enter openly into this ritual and symbolic space – a space which enables us to be open to the gift of faith as a virtue, that is, 'a stable disposition which orients existence towards God and inclines the heart to hear the Word of God.' Echoing a pastoral letter written by the French Catholic Bishops on this same topic, Chauvet sees the preferred pastoral response to the reception of such rites of passage as not being "ah what madness!" but, rather, "what a possible opportunity!" All in all, "an 'acceptable time' is offered to the parents [of the child being Baptized] in order to (re)discover the Gospel as Good News for themselves and for their children, and thus to make a step towards God and the Church, even though it is known that they come for many reasons, largely unconscious and very ambiguous."

CEOQUE SHIPS

Our relationship with God, while indeed real and effective is also ambiguous. This ambiguity is related to the fact that any genuine and meaningful relationship with God comes about only through the ambiguity of mediations – through words and actions which, because they are spoken and performed by human beings, combine an ambiguous mixture of both human and divine elements. Indeed, there is a "blessed ambiguity" at the very heart of our relationship with God.

Louis-Marie Chauvet, The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body, trans. Madeline Beaumont (Collegeville: Pueblo, 2001.)

Louis-Marie Chauvet, Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995.

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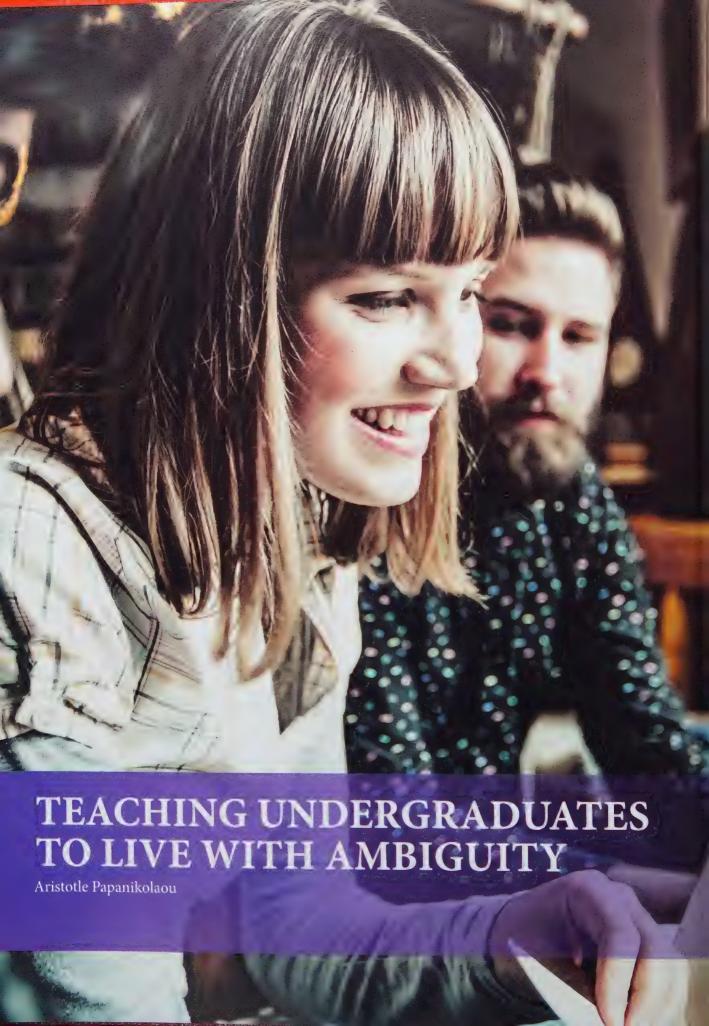
QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

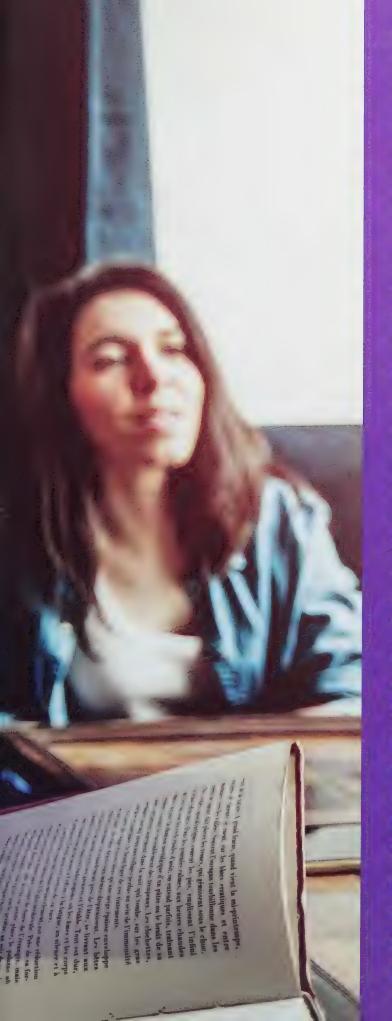
- 1. Dr. Witherington suggests that rather than thinking of ambiguity as an evil to be avoided, we should consider it as the very place we meet God. Do you agree that ambiguity can be a blessing? How has that been true in your life?
 - Marie Chauvet, the author notes our relationship with God is always mediated; hence the need of sacraments. Even the Church itself is a mediating institution. But mediation brings with it certain unavoidable tensions such as balancing of the concrete particular with a universal mystery that has no limits. Though we may not have thought of it this way, we all face these tensions every day as we deal with the immediate but always keeping one eye on the transcendent. Here is where ambiguity rests. Think of an example of this tension in your own life experience or in your ministry.
 - Fr. Chauvet, writing in harmony with the pastoral message of the French Bishops, argues, on the basis of mediation and ambiguity, that children of non-practicing Catholics can (and should) be baptized if the parents come forward with the request. Do you understand his reasoning? Do you agree? How do you handle similar "ambiguous" situations/celebrations in your family or parish community?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

T. Derrick Witherington is a Doctoral Research Assistant at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies of the KU Lenven and secretary of the faculty's research group. Theology in a Postmodern Context. He is currently finishing a dissertation on the Theological methodology of Louis-Marie Chauvet and its applicability in a Western post-secular context under the direction of Lieven Boeve. His interests include liturgical and sacramental theology, philosophy of religion, and the relationship between the Church and cultures.





When I was hired at Fordham, I was told that I was to teach the core freshman theology course, "Faith and Critical Reason." Given a few guidelines and a sample syllabi, I was left to construct the syllabus according to my own vision. Several thoughts immediately came to mind regarding how I would frame the course. First, I guessed there would be a variety of responses among the students to a required course in theology. I expected some students would be ambivalent: others would be resentful, and a few would question how theology could be taught in an academic setting when it is a matter of private, subjective "opinion." The study of theology is virtually absent in schools of all levels in the United States, and even in a Catholic institution many students would likely find it almost an affront that such a course would be required. These students, I conjectured, would be on the defensive, having already decided that taking this course was simply the price they had to pay for attending Fordham.

I structured my course to address this ambivalence and resistance by first making students aware of how they arrived at their own ideas about theology. In order to accomplish this self-critical awareness, I structured the first part of the course as a sociological, historical and philosophical exploration of secularization in the United States. We begin looking at the debate about secularization, return to the past to make schematic sense of how we got here, and end by discussing the face of modern religion fundamentalism. In the historical tracing of the process of secularization, students study Descartes, Newton and the masters of suspicion—Feuerbach, Marx and Freud-who, in my opinion, did theology a favor with their unrelenting and vociferous attack on religion. My goal in this part of the course is to make students aware that their ideas about theology, their interpretation of "religious" versus "spiritual," their resistance to and caricatures of what it means to be religious, did not emerge in a vacuum. Where they stand in relation to theology has much to do with a process that began almost four-hundred years ago—the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment; they are products of this history as much as they are actors in it. I end with a discussion of fundamentalism in the hope that [what they see as the dominant face of religion] is, ironically, a modern phenomenon. In making students more critically aware of the context within which they construct their own ideas about theology and religion, they may be more open to thinking otherwise about theology and religion. My goal is to open them up to the possibility of theology as a form of self-critical reflection on unavoidable questions posed by the human experience.

Only after this self-critical awareness of the current situation do I then lead them to more existential questions about faith, which include: faith and the existence of evil, the nature of faith, faith and reason, and faith and practices. Christian theology is not explicitly addressed in this latter part of the course, although it is clearly framing the discussion. The exploration of these themes is more self-consciously

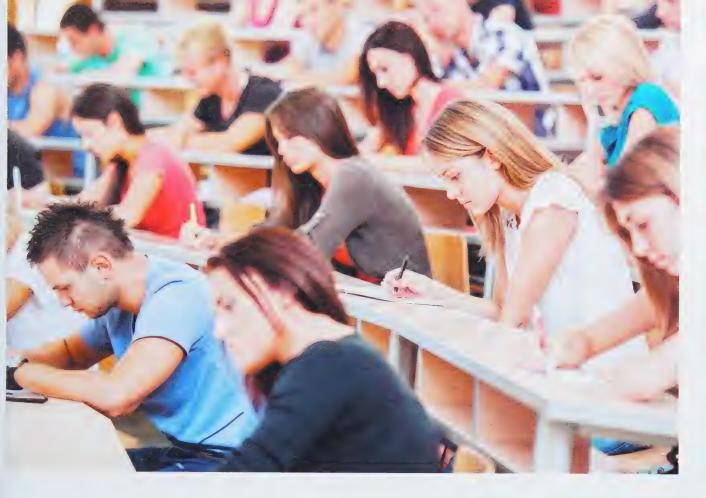
theological, but the goal is not so much about conveying specific content as it is opening students to new ways of thinking about these issues.

Many students think that theology attempts to rationalize the existence of God in light of evil. But is that really the only way to think about the question of God and evil? Some students think that faith has nothing to do with reason. But is that really the case? Most students think that one faith cannot be argued to be more reasonable than another faith, even if that faith is in something absurd — like the flying spaghetti monster— but does that make sense? Students also think the point of religious practices is to prove oneself to God. But is that all there is to it?

Some students declare themselves as spiritual, not religious, because they have a monolithic view of religion, (something religions themselves have actually fostered). They presume that becoming a part of religion is to blindly accept an authoritarian structure that dictates what should be believed and tries to scare people into compliance by dangling the possibility of hell. Students often think the gist of religion is to do and believe what one is told so as to get a reward after death. They also think religion hypocritical, as it seems not to practice what it preaches. Notwithstanding some measure of truth embedded within all these claims—critiques which all religions must claim some ownership—my goal is not to challenge directly these overgeneralized caricatures about religion, but to show them that it could be otherwise.

This "otherwise" is an understanding of the human being as called to a relationship of communion with God, and practices like prayer and fasting were not developed to prove something to God or to score points with God, but are time-honored practices that rewire the body so as to make it available to the always-on-offer presence of God.

I want to show my students that their understanding of bad religion is based on bad theology—a

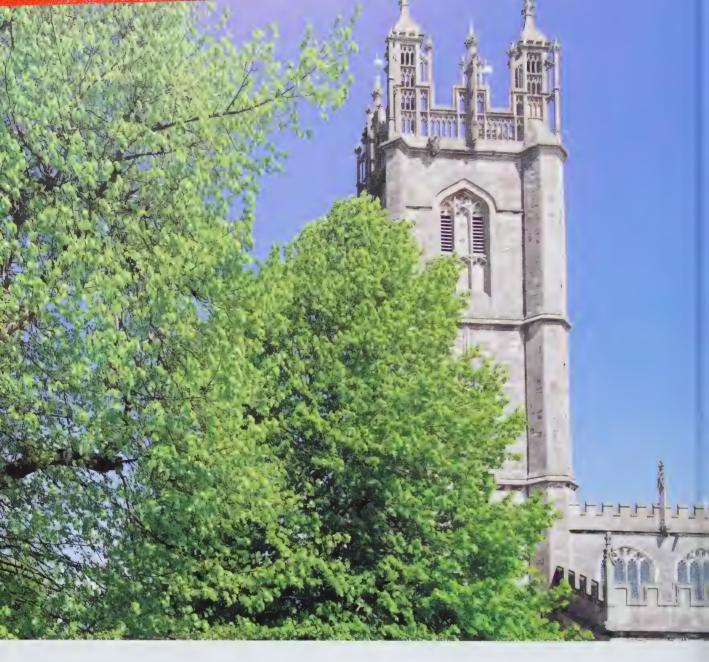


nominalistic/dualistic conception of God in which God stands over and against the world, creating the world, dictating rules, and moving souls around after death. I hope to persuade them that good theology attempts to make sense of how God can be in relation to the "not-God," the world, and still be God; or, how the world can be in communion with God without being consumed into divinity. For this reason I end the course with readings from Orthodox thinkers (St. Gregory of Nyssa, Anthony Bloom), or treat an Orthodox theme, such as the Jesus Prayer (Salinger's Franny and Zooey).

I try to lead students away from the overbearing überstructures that are designed to force people to think a certain way or think they are never doing enough. Instead, I lead them to an understanding of being "religious" that has to do with formation of the person to be in a certain way—and that being is one of communion with the divine. In this sense, being religious is less about agreeing to certain

propositions or following certain rules, but about transforming one's mode of being in the world. Being religious is very much like being an artist.

Because Fordham has a special BFA program with the Alvin Ailey School, I use dance as an analogy. I ask the students whether someone who has studied dance but has never danced "knows" dance as well as someone who has trained as a dancer. They immediately and instinctively answer that the trained dancer "knows" more about dance. I then try to lead them to articulate what this "knowing" entails. A dancer must submit to a regimen of training that usually begins with basic practices that must be mastered to the point where they are performed without thinking. This training is done under the tutelage of a teacher, who has been through the training. The student of dance then progresses to more advanced practices, still under the guidance of a teacher, struggling to integrate techniques of dance into their very being.



All this training is usually done within an institutional setting, where there are clear hierarchies, boards of directors, politics, a community of dancers that do not necessarily like one another, dancers who are more concerned with their ego than simply dancing for the sake of dancing. And, yet, in the midst of all of all this ugliness, there is a tradition of formation in dance that is passed on from generation to generation that is time tested and through which one may emerge as a "dancer," and that could not have been formed without institutionalization. Only by submitting to this tradition can one become a dancer who is not dancing to the audience, but is dancing simply

for the sake of dance; the choreography has seized the dancer rather than the dancer controlling the particular moves of the choreography. Those capable of this kind of performance are usually the "saints" of dances, they add to the tradition while always remaining within it. This kind of performance could never be possible without submitting to rigorous training; only through the practices of the tradition can one hope to be this kind of dancer.

Being religious then is about being in a way that embodies the divine presence, and working toward being available toward the divine presence in and through religious practices and tradition. Being religious is not a set of rules one must follow or a bunch of propositions to which one must assent; it is first and foremost an art form, an expression of beauty that is also truth and goodness. The rules and propositions of the tradition—and every tradition has its rules and propositions—aim at the formation of the person as a work of art.

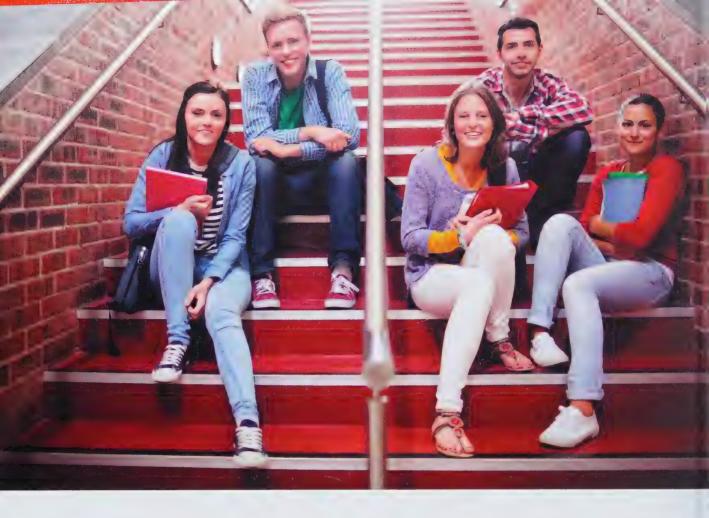
To illustrate this, I turn explicitly to the Christian commandment to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind . . . [and to] love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt 22:36-38). I pose a hypothetical to the students: If I had a neighbor whom I hated and toward whom I felt anger and if I gave that person \$5,000 in order to avoid being "wacked" for not paying gambling debts, have I fulfilled the commandment? They are smart enough to know that just giving money out of kindness or out of sympathy does not fulfill the Lord's commandment of love. I then tell them that, nypothetically, as a Christian, I have a problem—I know that in my heart that I harbor hate and anger for my neighbor. As St. Maximus the Confessor says, 'The one who sees a trace of hatred in his own heart through any fault at all toward any man whoever he may be makes himself completely foreign to the love for God, because love for God in any way admits of no hatred for man" (The Four Hundred Chapters on Love, 1:15). How, then, do I change that? Once we get past comments like, "well you can love someone vithout liking them," students start to get the idea hat genuine love emerges from a process of letting go of self. Hate for my neighbor may be overcome f I force myself to have conversations with him, and conversation is a practice. Students understand that wo people who celebrate fifty years of commitment have a love that is different than when they first met. Students understand that for two people to be able o celebrate such a love has required much daily practice."

t. Maximus the Confessor is constantly in the back of my mind as I try to explain to the students that tractices help to form virtues such as patience,

kindness, honesty, empathy, forgiveness—to name only a few—that are needed to make growth in love possible and to avoid vices such as dishonesty, fear, anger, hatred, and self-loathing, which destroy relationships. The Christian commandment to love is a calling to a certain kind of relationship with God, a realization of love; and, since God is love, it is a relationship of communion with God, of experience of God, of theosis. This relationship, however, requires work, not to "merit" the love (as if love can be merited) but to make oneself available for fullness of love that God offers, which is nothing less than God's very life.

Students are not quite sure what to say when I ask them how a practice like fasting contributes to the learning of love. When I explain that fasting is linked to something we do every day—food—and that every time we fast, food is an occasion to bring God to our awareness, and that this awareness helps sustain a relation with God that makes love possible, then they get it. If two people had a relationship of distance and never wrote to one another, then forgetfulness would likely set in and love would not grow. Since God is invisible, forgetfulness of God is one of the greatest human temptations. Fasting helps to mitigate that forgetfulness and, in so doing, makes love for God possible. In addition to memory, fasting as a discipline helps form the virtues mentioned above, which, again, are the condition for the possibility of realizing a depth to love.

There are plenty of Christians who follow all the rules and assent to all the required propositions, but who cannot seem to get past anger and hatred of those who disagree with their propositions and rules; and, there are Christians who use this faithfulness to rules and propositions as a platform for attacking others. But in the end, to be Christian is not simply to follow rules and assent to propositions; to be Christian is to be loving in the form of the greatest commandment. Like being a dancer, it is to perform love in a way in which love (God) has seized our being.



The question of this generation of college students is not "why God?" but "why religion?" My hope, perhaps overly optimistic, is to introduce a different way of understanding being religious, one that entails an experience of the living God. The possibility of such an experience requires, however, tradition, institutionalization, and practices. But this experience emerges within and through the tradition, in a way that allows one to manifest the beauty of the tradition even amidst its ugliness, and to situate oneself in relation to this ugliness without anger, hatred or self-righteousness.

My students are searching for purity; I have to teach them that they will not find it and that they have to learn to live with ambiguity--even in a liberal democracy, in which lie their greatest hopes. What

I want them to see is that humans are created for communion with the living God. There is a way of being religious that is the experience of God, and it is this experience that gives them the greatest hope to negotiate the ambiguity in the world.

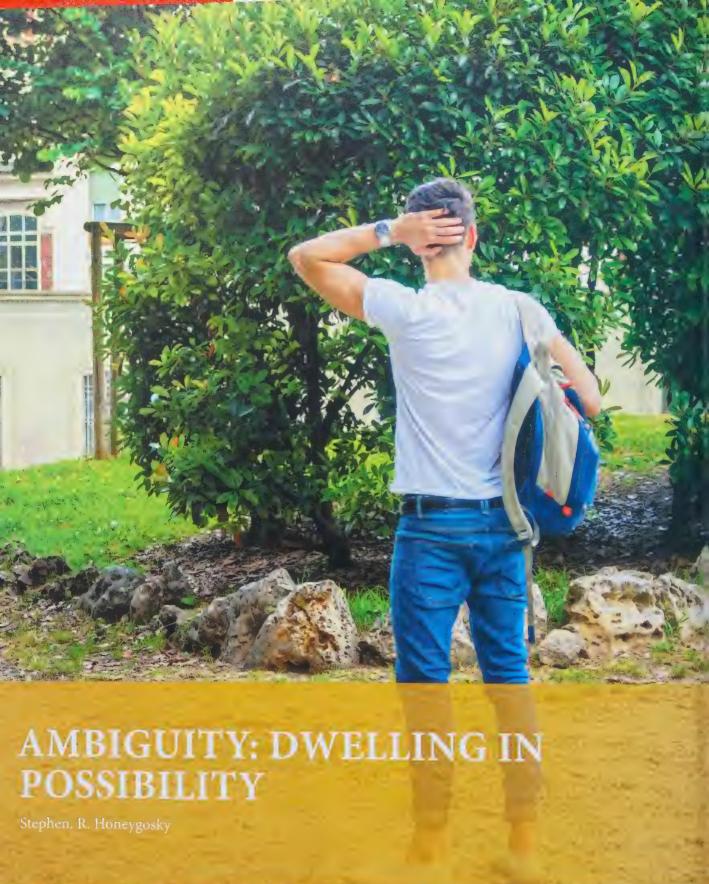
QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- 1. Dr. Papanikolaou notes that millennials are not asking "why God?" but rather "why religion?" For a host of reasons, "religion" seems to leave a bad taste in their mouth. Have you noticed that tendency in today's youth? Do you also see that same skepticism toward religion with people of all ages, ethnic, racial and religious backgrounds?
- 2. The author suggests a good way of responding to "why religion?" is using the analogy of a dancer: only by conforming to rigorous practices of formation over a long period of time does the dancer truly embody the dance. A true dancer is not just going through motions! In your life, how did religion become "real" and meaningful for you? Was it just "hanging in there" or was there perhaps some "crisis" which really moved you to appreciate and value the structure and patterns of religious expression of faith?
- 3. The college professor/author suggests that today's students search for genuine "purity" among any/all who practice a faith tradition; they are not comfortable with ambiguity or apparent inconsistency in themselves or others. Do you find those same struggles in yourself? Do you think such desires for "purity" of faith and religious expression trouble people of all religious backgrounds? Does the very nature of religion somehow lead to "guilt trips" rather than consolation? How might we work at setting aside such psychological fears and thus attain a faith that can live peacefully with ambiguity and imperfection?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aristotle Papanikolaou is professor of theology and the Archbishop Demetrios Chair in Orthodox Theology and Culture at Fordham University. He is also the cofounding director of Fordham's Orthodox Christian Studies Center. Among his publications, he is author of The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy.





DISTENING IN THE DARWINGS.

the cupht in a panalyzing ambiguity precisely because it is so silent: if can't fact that our culture is one which is geared in many ways to help us crade attention to the sound of voices, the time. This keeps us immersed in a flood of racket and words. . . we are not fully present and not entirely absent; not fully withdrawn, yet not completely available." (A Book of Hours op. 147-148).

14 May have They upen their retail and rous. Like From PSALM 77 bons that record and room, away, bons water my life drains away, the T ALM 21 The Prayer of an Innecent Person 2 la grea all my bones grow soft. My hear has become like wax. to v I from the latter of the series of a_{μ} YOK of As dry as a poisterd is my throat; wheels away within me. Y 014 west 4 3 100 1 P.C. (c ory as gue sticks to my palate; 2 Mr Cod. my Cod. 105 1 10 - 31 to Mandement you lay me in the dust of death 4 Eve a pack of evildoers classes in on the Who so far breat my salt for help. If they does surround me. mon my cree of anguishin so wested are my hands and feet 3 My Cool. I call by day, but you do not that I can count all my twices by night, best I have no retief i they divide my gaments among them, 18 that I can me and giorat. 4 Yet you are enthronced as the Hody One. for my clothing they cast lots you are the place of breach M Star you, LORD, do not stay far off: \$ In you our ansestors trusted. my strength, come quickly to help me they trusted and you rescued them. he 6 To you they cried out and they escaped; my toclorn life from the teeth of the dog. in you they trusted and were not Il Dehver me from the sword. 2 Save me from the Iron's mouth. 7 But I am a worm, hardly burnan." my posit life from the horns of wild scarned by everywhee despined by the halls. 8 All who see me mock me: mey curl their lips and jeet. I Then I will proximin your name to the they shake their heads at me:m ips. a evan relied on the Lords - let him deliver Selection .. I will braise you "" assembly.

Where and when do we best hear the Word we repress and ignore? Is it not most often in the darkness of our lives, in our sleepless nights when we are alone with God? Such is the beauty of the Psalms; many of them almost scream the pain of loneliness and bemoan the ambiguity of meaning.

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann, in *The* Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary (1984), suggests that there are three types of psalms - those of "orientation," "disorientation" and "new orientation." Brueggemann would say Psalms of "disorientation" are most compelling for they deal with loss, pain, mystery, confusion and ambiguity. Only when we acknowledge disorientation can we hope to attain a new orientation. Brueggemann explains, "The Psalms are profoundly subversive of the dominant culture, which wants to deny and cover over the darkness we are called to enter. ... The reason the darkness may be faced and lived in is that even in the darkness, there is One to address." In particular, Brueggemann describes the necessity

for the individual and community to pray with regularity these "Psalms of Disorientation:"

The use of these 'psalms of darkness' may be judged by the world to be acts of unfaith and failure, but for the trusting community, their use is an act of bold faith, albeit a transformed faith. These Psalms are precious because they insist that the world must be experienced as it really is and not in some pretended or stylized way. These Psalms are also critical to all believers because they remind us disorder is indeed a proper subject for discourse with God. There is nothing out of bounds, nothing precluded or inappropriate. Everything "belongs" or "fits" in this conversation of the heart.

Finally, Brueggemann reminds us that all the Psalms which begin in a circumstance of disorientation (for example Psalm 22) end up with a proclamation of peaceful trust in the Lord. Our crying out in pain is heard and often that is enough!

Barbara Brown-Taylor likewise assists us in our walk through ambiguity; in this case, referring to it as "darkness." Given culture's passion for "light," darkness is a discomforting word. There are, of course, various types of darkness – the darkness we sometimes choose (running away from the truth) and the darkness we cannot control, the darkness of spiritual "winter" and prolonged, uncertain diseases that must run their course.

Blatantly personal, Barbara Brown-Taylor is not afraid to show readers that any such darkness need not prompt flight or anger. In fact, she welcomes the darkness, for in that very ambiguity, she and the Holy One share terrain and vision. As she writes:

Sometimes, when I have survived a day of three airports, two expressways, and one rush hour, turning down my dark road has resurrection in it. The deep breath comes first, opening up parts that have not had air all day. Hello, hello, I say to the welcoming committee in the woods—all those bright eyes come to let me know that I am home. (Learning to Walk in the Dark, p.62).

She advises, "Drop what you believe about the dark, or have been taught about the dark....
Endarkenment, like enlightenment, is a work in progress. The best thing I can say is that learning to walk in the dark has allowed me to take back my faith, removing it from the glare of the full solar tradition to recover by the light of the moon" (p.186). This lovely insight is drenched in—or shall I say, divinely cloaked with—the mysterious dew of ambiguity for those who can listen, feel, and learn. She concludes: "And what better way—when the moon and the flowers are both full, and I go outside to walk among them—to remember how much light there is in the dark?" (p.187)

LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

Let us consider some Scriptural vignettes that address the mystery of the light of the Lord precisely in darkness, confusion and ambiguity.

1. THE LORD IN THE CLOUD (1 KINGS 8:1-13)

Everything is perfectly prepared for worship—elements, vessels, people, priests. Then, surprise! The Temple fills with paralyzing smoke that confounds their plans, thwarts their attempted observance, and overpowers their ritualizing endeavors. Along with Solomon their king, the people see, receive, ponder, and surrender to the Divine Presence. Solomon actually seems to dance with the ambiguity. With reverent resolve, he simply declares: "The Lord God has chosen to dwell in thick cloud."

2. TOBIT AND ANNA (TOBIT 2:1-11)

The very point of this account, written hundreds of years ago, is that there are cataracts, and there are cataracts. Some cataracts are external and physical while others are internal, the crusting over of mind and heart, thus distorting the way we view others, ourselves, the situation, and even the Lord God. Tobit, pure of heart though he be, cannot see Anna (or himself) accurately because of his inner cataracts. Anna diagnoses and verbally confronts him. By the end of the story, his vision is restored. But he had to endure the ambiguity of waiting.

3. MARY (LK. 1:26-38) THE ANNUNCIATION

Mary would seem, according to Luke's short verses, to be totally open to the ambiguity of all that was being asked of her: to accept the commission to conceive and bear a divine child and not really being able to discuss "things" with Joseph or her parents. Talk about ambiguity! But she carries it all in silence and keeps pondering on the mystery of which she is a partner.

1. ZECHARIAH, father of John the Baptist, is an elderly man, a dutiful, faithfully observant Jew of the priestly class. Yet he gets challenged by an extensive patch of ambiguity—first, not knowing how a pregnancy will unfold for his elderly, barren wife, then handling his muteness during a "timeout" God has decided he needs. (Lk. 1:5-23) Only after nine months, at the naming of the babe at his circumcision, is the ambiguity of silence broken.

A THOMAS AND HAUSTING OF CLICAL

Jesus has just finished teaching—urging the disciples (and us) not to let our hearts be troubled, since He is going to prepare a place for us in His Father's abundantly roomy house. Thomas emerges as our "twin," the doubter, the stubborn one who is not afraid to bluntly complain: "Lord, we don't know where you're going. How can we know the way?" (Jn. 14:5). Thomas is the classic voice which cries out what everyone else is too polite to articulate. Was the answer of Jesus we read in John 14 really understandable? Was it not just further ambiguity? Thomas and the others had to wait through the darkness, tears, shame and pain till Resurrection dawned. But as Thomas also reminds us, even the surprise of the Resurrection had its own ambiguities!

"DWELLING IN POSSIBILITY"

Disorientation. Darkness. Ambiguity. That's life! So how do we grow, create meaning, and find this Jesus, who sits at the right hand of the Father, when we see the wrinkles and shadows in this messy world,

real Church, imperfect family, and within our own brokenness, failure and limitations?

What exactly is ambiguity? Dictionaries can reinforce what generally comes to mind: doubtfulness or uncertainty (American Heritage) or something capable of being understood in more than one way (Merriam Webster Dictionary). Good enough, I suppose. The opening line of one of Emily Dickinson's poems gives us perhaps a more refined and sharpened way of looking at our lives: "I dwell in possibility." Living with ambiguity may seem like living in a cloud, but nonetheless on the other side of the cloud is the sun. Anything is possible - even and especially on a cloudy day! We can find consolation in the last lines of Exodus. Like the Jews in the desert for 40 years, with humility and patience we discover the fire within the cloud that guides us at every stage of our journey.

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"Lord, we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?" (Jn. 14:5),

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- 1. Fr. Honeygosky suggests that ambiguity is "dwelling in possibility." One of the blessings of ambiguity is that it does not close doors. If we can be patient with darkness and silence, eventually our spiritual vision and hearing will discover the Lord's presence which has been there all along! Have you experienced this gradual process of discovery in your own life?
- Pray some of the Psalms of disorientation (Psalms 13, 22, 88 and 102) and notice the insight of Brueggemann that eventually these Psalms end on a note of quiet confidence and peace.
- 3. What ambiguity "haunts" you at this time? Can you see hints of "possibilities" dawning?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A Benedicting mank and pried for forty-time pains. Stephen Honey gody received his B.A. in Build if and German from St. Vincent College. (Lambe, PA1 and his M.A. and Ph.D. in English and American Laterature from the University of Winconsin-Madison. With his decides long experience in pastural ministry on compares and in partition in well as serving as Protonor of English of Smon Hill University (Greensburg, PA), University of Pinaburgh, Penn State and St. Vincent Gollege, Honeygoday has also been involved both inter-foith assess. Ching an interdisciplinary approach that facused on the indust if Barature, culture, lastory, religions, and the table, he wrote Malton's House of God: The Invisible and Visible Church (University of Massauri Press (1993)), and edited Religion and Spirituality. Bridging the Gop (Twenty-Third Publications (2006)). He continues to exercise his presently ministry to partition and a presently consistency a book on the Policy.



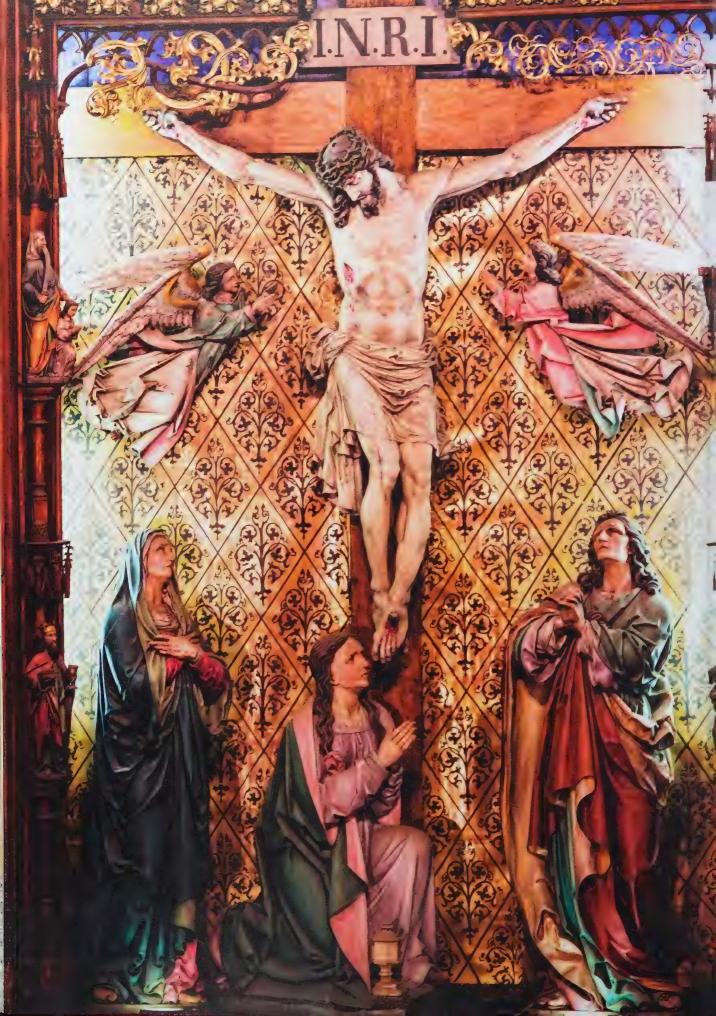
NOTHING—ONLY GOD

Susan Muto, PhD



INTRODUCTION

This article provides a practical summary of the reaching of St. John of the Cross (1542-1591) and recognition to the convemporary works of sportunity. The author will lead us on the path of John of the Cross — through asceticism to mysticism, or more precisely, from the 'reforming discipling of asceticism' to the "transforming disciples hip of mysticism."



ASCETICISM AND THE PURGATIVE WAY

Asceticism entails the lifelong process of conforming our will to the will of God for us. In cooperation with grace, we strive to reform habits and attitudes, practices and dispositions that might obscure our relationship with God.

We might say that from a "purgative" point of view, asceticism enables us to clear away what clutters our heart such as excessive activity devoid of contemplative prayer. Asceticism is a remedial force sustained by grace that prevents and ultimately frees us from inordinate attachments to power, pleasure, and possession.

On the "constructive" side, asceticism reminds us that we must remain inwardly and outwardly available to the word of God and its transformative effects on self and others. It means that we are vigilant and ready to respond whenever our Divine Guest knocks on the door of our heart. We open it and let Christ enter to sustain and deepen our human and spiritual life. Knowing from experience that renunciation is the key to liberation, St. John says in one of his oft-quoted *Sayings of Light and Love*, "Deny your desires and you will find what your heart longs for." (Number 15).

Not only must we listen to God in the silence of our heart; we must also go forth to proclaim the Good News in family life, Church, and society. The disciplines we undertake as means of grace must result in a fuller living of Christian discipleship. If in its "destructive" mode asceticism helps us to oppose all forms of self-centeredness, manipulation, vanity, avarice, anger, lust, gluttony, sloth, and envy, then constructively it is a prerequisite for following Christ from the foot of the Cross to the empty tomb. As the saint says, "Although you perform many works, if you do not deny your will and submit yourself, losing all solicitude about yourself and your affairs, you will not make progress" (Number 69).

Ascetical practices like fasting do not aim to deplete

our vital powers nor to render us emotionally insensitive. The goal of this or any other spiritual discipline is not to acquire superior merit or to achieve self-improvement. The practice of physical mortification, in moderation and in keeping with our life call, is meant to increase our awareness of the sanctity of the body and our deepest hungers and help us be alert to the needs of others.

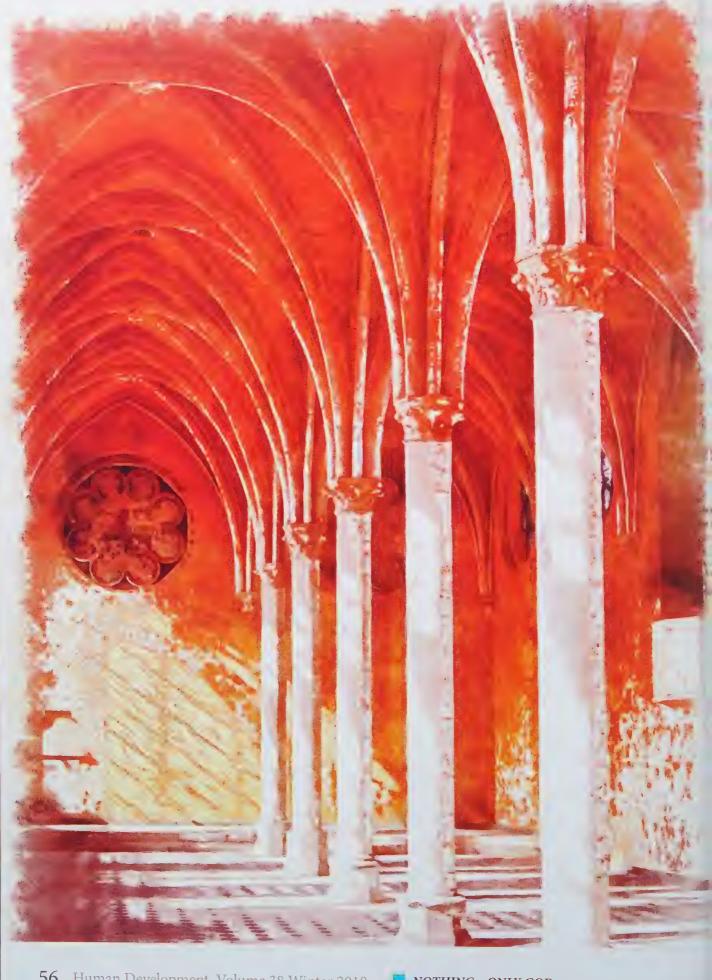
The solution to untamed sensuality is not the opposite extreme of disembodied spirituality. What St. John teaches is a gradual transformation of selfish sensuality by selfless spirituality—a change of heart in which no natural endowment is lost. Healthy asceticism, devoid of any attempt to foster erratic heroism, enables us to respond to the universal call to holiness and to the joy of living a committed and consecrated life.

Ascetical practices such as silence, formative reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation, become reliable means to foster Christian action in justice, peace, and mercy. Otherwise we risk becoming mere activists, whose functioning is an end in itself rather than a graced and gracious expression of Christian evangelization.

That being said, images, methods, and techniques that aid meditation can be helpful to beginners on the path to deeper prayer. God uses these means to "woo" the soul to himself, to set the stage for further spiritual awakening. St. John saw them not as ends in themselves but as means of grace to attain union with God. The danger is that the spiritually awakened may mistake a signpost for their destination, feeling content with these means and ceasing to advance to the goal of union with God.

"MYSTICISM"

To understand the meaning of mysticism in St. John's life and writings, we must first ponder what it is not. He regrets any identification of mysticism with paranormal experiences, replete with raptures,



visions, and locutions. Extremely critical of such manifestations, he warns spiritual directors and the faithful to let them go, and not to dwell upon them or demand a repeat performance. Our every action should be grounded in faith, hope, and charity, in prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance, in the deepest foundations of faith where one clings to the God who consoles and not on the consolations of God.

According to St. John, mysticism does not lead to the attainment of a special kind of knowledge (gnosis) reserved for a select few. To counter this pseudo-spiritual tendency, he recommends that we follow the common ways of liturgy, Word, and Sacrament that proclaim God's awesome love for humankind, a love that sought us while we were still sinners and reached out to save us (cf. Rom 5:8). St. John invites us to blend in our personhood Mary of Bethany, who sat at the feet of Jesus, and Martha who prepared their supper (cf. Lk 10:38-42). We are, so to speak, to be contemplatives-in-action and active contemplatives.

In Chapters 13 to 15 of Book Two of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, St. John identifies "signs" by which we can verify the interior movements of the Spirit and turn in loving attentiveness to the presence of God in our heart and in our world. He tells us why the Holy Spirit may lead us from our former way of meditation, at least for the time being, so that under the guidance of grace we can move forward to the state of contemplation.

A discerning heart needs to recognize three signs during this movement into contemplation: first, the realization that one cannot engage discursive meditation nor receive satisfaction from it as before; second, that one is disinclined to fix his or her imagination or sense faculties upon particular objects, be they exterior or interior; and third, that a person likes to remain alone in loving awareness of God, without particular considerations, in interior

peace and quiet and repose, and without the acts and exercises associated with the intellect, memory and will.

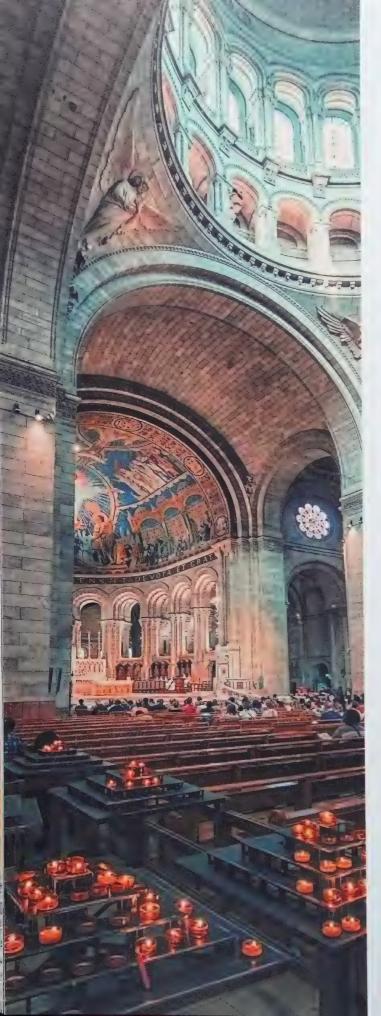
St. John observes that these three signs must be at work together. If one evidences the first sign only, it could be that his or her inability to use imaginative means of meditation might be due to dissipation of mind or lack of diligence. The cause of both dissipation and disinclination could be what St. John identified as melancholy or what we might discern as low grade depression or mood swings. That is why he insists on the presence of the third sign, loving awareness of God and a longing for more silence and solitude.

At this juncture of the spiritual life, the soul may begin to pass beyond knowing, through the nights of sense and spirit to deeper union with God in love. Paradoxically, the purer this contemplative knowledge, the darker it seems to the perceiving intellect. God is at once transcendent and immanent, the Creator of all that is and a child born of Mary in Bethlehem.

BECOMING A LIVING PRAYER

The privileged place of this awesome interchange between us and God occurs in the Eucharist. To eat of Christ's body and drink of Christ's blood alerts us to whatever in us is unconformed to the Divine Will. In the presence of the Trinity, we beg for the grace to be and become, in St. John's words, "living flames of love" that draw others to the irresistible warmth and forgiveness of God. This deep desire moves us from the twilight of sensual and spiritual deprivation; through the midnight of pure faith; to the dawn of divine union with God and communion with others.

If our functioning is not informed by this "nothing—only God" way of being, we risk escalating our own quest for egocentric control. While we may succeed secularly, what we do may serve only to deflect us



from God's plan. We build "little beyonds" to replace the "Great Beyond" beckoning us at all times to operate from the center of our humility.

As St. John reminds us in his *Sayings of Light and Love*, only "a tree that is cultivated and guarded through the care of its owner produces its fruit at the expected time" (Number 6). By cultivating an absolute preference for God and doing everything for God's honor and glory, we enter joyfully into the detachment (asceticism) that is necessary for the sake of experiencing Christ's humanity and divinity, now mirrored on every level of our being (mysticism).

Our love for God frees us from any activity or imperfection that makes us resistant to the forming, reforming, and transforming power of grace at work in us and everywhere in the world. Without this integration of asceticism and mysticism, we may look on the outside like sturdy trees but on the inside we are only withered branches. That explains why "whether [we] eat or drink, or speak, or converse...or do anything else [we] should always do so with the desire for God and with [our] heart fixed on him" (Counsels to a Religious on How to Reach Perfection, 9.)

Since contemplative prayer is to the spirit what breath is to the body, St. John advises us not merely to say prayers once in a while—after all, we breathe in and out all the time, even when we are asleep—but to become living prayer. At one and the same time, we can live a life of contemplative prayer and be engaged in active service to the world. There is no moment when we see ourselves apart from our Beloved since he is nearer to us than we are to ourselves.

Now that our one and only guide is God, we find the way, in silence and solitude, in speaking and solidarity, to practice the sacrament of the present moment, freed from every alien satisfaction, comfort, and support. Only now do we experience liberty of

What could give us more joy in this life than for God's will to become God's will for us? We two are now one. For us there is nothing—only God.

spirit. Only now do we reach union with the Divine Word, a practice that silences useless worry and leads us to contemplate God's presence in the peaks and valleys of everyday life.

The waves may crash and the winds may blow, but we cling to Christ who is our rock. With prayers for protection on our lips and for courage in our heart, we follow Jesus from this earthly existence to the lasting supper prepared by him to refresh and deepen love in time and eternity.

TRANSFORMED LOVE

St. John compares the soul perfected in this state of transformation to wood burning, so intensely that it gives off warmth and generates more flames. As the soul suffers from these wounds of love, so is the soul cleansed, healed, and perfected. Her delight in God compensates for her suffering, however intense it may be.

According to St. John of the Cross, not only is the soul united with the "divine fire," she herself becomes a living flame. The action of Holy Spirit within her is to set her heart on fire. This fire of love penetrates the substance of the soul, stripping it of its unlikeness to God to such a degree that the old self dies and the new self emerges like a butterfly from a cocoon. A heart thus transformed makes her every action one act of love.

As we grow in purity of heart, we ought not to be surprised—rather we ought to expect—more frequent and generous communications from God.

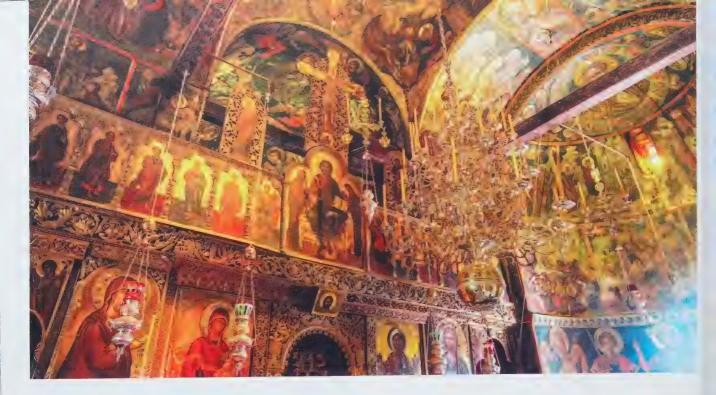
A great measure of the delight we feel stems from the fact that God is the "principle agent" in this matter.

Now we need to open our hearts to receive the splendor of grace in the depths of our being and then let it flow over into our daily doing.

Crucial at this juncture is not felt love but faith-filled love. The time will come when God chooses to expel the dryness we may occasionally feel, but for now the only sure hold to which we can cling is faith. Perhaps this image will be clarifying: it is as if a wall of flame (God's love) barrels into a narrow corridor (our will). The walls of this corridor are swiftly licked by the flame. The more it penetrates them, the farther they widen. Our will is like those walls. Only as time passes is it capable of receiving to the full the force of God's love. When this happens, we may understand for the first time who Christ is: he is one glorious wound of love, and he wants us to be transformed in love.

The deeper God carves his graces on the walls of our inner life, the more we suffer from the utter inadequacy of anything or anyone we used to cling to as ultimate. Without the heavenly food of God's presence, every taste of life, even the best it has to offer, will at some time turn sour. Yet with God as the main guest in our home, every person, event, and thing takes on new meaning. Love this mature conveys, beyond gratification or achievement, immense gratitude and lasting joy.

What could give us more joy in this life than for God's will to become God's will for us? We two are now one. For us there is nothing—only God.



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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Following the writings of St. John of the Cross, Dr. Muto takes us on a journey through asceticism to mysticism. She notes that asceticism has both a purgative or cleansing aspect and an openness to being transformed, fully accepting God's will for us. The two "moments" of asceticism are complimentary: we ourselves must clear away whatever could impede God's grace and then we will be more disposed for God's interventions in our lives. Have you seen/experienced both aspects of asceticism in your own journey? In your own journey of faith, have you become increasingly more vulnerable and open to God and less in control?
- Dr. Muto makes the point that neither asceticism nor even mysticism should be a goal in and of itself: they are steps on the way to a deeper love of God and neighbor, a means for transformed love. Do you sometimes get caught up in the "method" and forget the goal? Do you sometimes settle for the consolations of God rather than resting in the God of all consolation?
- The author reminds us that St. John of the Cross' goal for all his readers is that we become a "living prayer:" we are so transformed that our whole being radiates our partnership with the Lord. Obviously, this imagery is idealistic and poetic and we must be careful not to "lose" our own unique identity. How do you balance this tension? How do you help others live with the ambiguity of trying to let go of control yet still be a human being with fears and needs for consolation and clarity?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Summ Muto, PhD, is executive director of the Epiphany Association and Dean of its Epiphany Academy of Formative Spirituality in Pirisburgh, Pennsylvania. An expert in literature and spirituality, she aims in her teaching to integrate the life of prayer and presence with professional ministry and inslepth formation in the home, church, and marketplace. Doctor Muto lectures intimally and internationally on many foundational facets of human and Christian formation in today's world.





Then John said in reply, Marier, we saw senseme earling out demans in your name and we tried to preven him because he does not follow our compone' lesus said to him. Do not prevent him, for whoever is not against you is for you." (Luke 9-19-50)

[[esux said]: "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me securers," (Luke 11:7.1)

Gospel of Luke to introduce this article the hearts and trumb of many people recent years in the politics of the Unitals. In the fight against terrorism it has economic status. And after violence in still great divisions among many peoI am a member of a religious community. I live with four other priests and brothers. Even in our small community, there are political differences, and for the most part, in order to keep "peace," we seldom have political discussions around the dinner table or elsewhere. On social media, I have seen such opposing points of view that they move me to wonder how people can seem to be experiencing a totally different reality in the same place. And when I post something on Facebook that has connections to political issues, I begin with a disclaimer that it does not represent any institution or community to which I belong, but only my own opinion. I have come to call them "disclaimer posts."

This is the situation in which many of us live, not just in the Unites States, but in various parts of the world. Questions concerning culture and building community among diverse groups of people have been with me for some time. I would like to share with you some of the things I have learned from the Scriptures and philosophical and theological studies, as well as my own experience, regarding how we might see and relate to those who are "other."

LETTING THE OTHER BE "OTHER"

The first Scripture passage on which I would like to reflect is Luke 10:38-42, Jesus visiting Martha and Mary. We know the story well. While Martha is busy about hosting Jesus, her sister Mary sits at His feet, listening to Him speak. Frustrated that she has no help, Martha complains to Jesus and tells Him to tell Mary to help her. Jesus refuses, and tells her that Mary "has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her."

Whether we side with Martha or Mary, I offer an interpretation of this scene I heard from a colleague of mine, Ms. Cathy Anthony. Her sense of the story was that Martha's sin was trying to make her sister Mary into another version of herself. Is that not a lesson for us to ponder?

Ouite often we do not even have a clue about our own tendency to exclude anyone not of our "type." When I served at Mater Dolorosa Passionist Retreat Center in Sierra Madre, CA, I got involved with the NCCJ, the National Conference of Community and Justice. Somewhere along the line, the volunteers decided that they needed to speak among themselves about the issues that they were addressing with other groups. The experience was eve-opening. Some of the African-American volunteers shared with us their feelings about integration, and, much to my surprise, it was not all positive. Most of their experience with integration was an attitude of "We will welcome you, as long as you become like us." So their experience was not so much real integration or enculturation, but one culture trying to dominate the other.

In the Gospels when Jesus drove the moneychangers and the merchants from the Temple, did not Jesus do something violent? Was He justified in His anger? We all know Jesus spoke of woes to the Pharisees and the scribes (Luke 11:37-53) but I also know that Jesus said to love even our enemies (Matthew 5:43-48 and Luke 6:27-36). Jesus showed this love in at least two ways. While Jesus could speak harshly to those who were opposed to Him, He kept on speaking to them! And, perhaps most meaningfully, on the Cross Jesus did not return violence for violence.

Quite often we do not even have a clue about our own tendency to

It seems that very often, when people of opposing views come together, there is a struggle to dominate the other, not learn from each other. True dialogue can happen only when we let go of trying to make the "other" in our image. Even Jesus did not do this. Consider the scene with the Syro-Phoenician woman (Matthew 15:21-28): He listened to her and even changed His mind!

SEEING EACH OTHER AS GOD SEES US

Another pertinent Scripture passage is John 19:26-27: When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there whom he loved, he said to his mother, Woman, behold, your son. Then he said to the beloved disciple, Behold, your mother. And from that hour the disciple took her into his home. Jesus put Mary and the beloved disciple into each other's care. He commanded them to see each in a new way. The challenge for many of us in these times is to see each other in a new and different manner. It is too tempting to see those who hold a different political viewpoint as an enemy, someone not worth listening to. As the parables teach us, we are not only called to see each other the way God sees us, but also to care for each other. As St. Thomas Aguinas wrote: "We must love them both — those whose opinions we share and those whose opinions we reject. For both have labored in the search for Truth and both have helped in the finding of it."

Another passage in the Gospels which throws some light on this issue is Mark 10:1-9. In responding to a question posed to Him about marriage and divorce, Jesus says: "Therefore what God has joined together no human being must separate." These words of Jesus are at the heart of what the Church believes about the sanctity of marriage. What if we were to expand the notion behind these words? Has not God "joined" us all together? In fact, we human beings are not only joined together with other human beings but as Pope



Francis reminds us in <u>Laudato Si</u>, we are all part of one, same creation: we share the same earth, air, water and sun.

DIALOGUE

So I have tried here to present, from a faith perspective, an attitude by which we can relate to those who are "other," according to the many ways we choose to see ourselves as "different." How do we practice the love of which Jesus and Thomas Aquinas speak?

One answer is through dialogue. Real dialogue has to start with the notion, actually, of the <u>truth</u> of the dignity of each person as a child of God, whether they believe in God or not, or have a different belief system from the one to which I may adhere.

Genuine dialogue involves a desire to build trust. When I was a seminarian at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, there were some people who were



offended just by the fact that I was a seminarian studying for a priesthood that was limited for the most part to single males. When I entered into conversations with people who felt this way, I may have agreed with some of the things they were saying, and at other times what they said would provoke defensiveness in me. I often described it as having the hairs on the back of my neck stand straight up. But one thing I learned was the value of staying in the conversation even when it became uncomfortable. In dialogues about race, my hope is always that I can listen to the anger of others while they may be willing to listen to my fear.

I am sure that there are many sources that provide excellent guidelines for conducting a dialogue. But the first challenge is how to break down the barriers so we can even have a dialogue! My experience with dialogues about race, for instance, is that they attract only the people who are open to having a dialogue in the first place. How do we attract those who may not be initially interested to hear out the other side?

I hope a faith perspective can give, at least within the Church, a starting point for recognizing the inherent humanity of the "other." Then, starting with that, perhaps some more common ground could be found. But there is still the challenge to bring people together. On occasion over the past year I have attempted to start a dialogue on Facebook. Knowing how imperfect a platform Facebook would

be for real dialogue, I still wanted to try it because I could not envision a time when these friends would be able or willing to meet face to face. I knew they were good people. But as I mentioned before, I was startled by how differently they interpreted the same action or event.

GRIEF AS A CONNECTOR

So I thought of asking questions that would hopefully be non-confrontational and at the same time would surface some common ground. I must confess that I have not gone back to it as of late, but one thread I am thinking of pursuing would be "grief." We have all experienced grief, and even if we were to extend the notion of grief beyond personal loss, for example, grieving the loss of humanity in war or violence or some natural disaster, or even the loss of common ground itself, we might find an avenue of communication and solidarity with each other. That is my hope.

Those who may have wanted to find a solution here will be disappointed. Is it possible to have real dialogue and a chance of mutual understanding? I find myself with two answers. One, I hope so. Two, it must be. The title of one of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s books is Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community? I hope our yearning for community will outweigh our temptation to chaos.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- 1. Fr. Paxton challenges us to let "the other" be "the other" that is, not to try to make them think and act like myself or my "group." Have you ever truly let someone "be" "the other?" Did you ever wonder at God's love of diversity?
- 2. The author suggests the rich possibilities of genuine dialogue and keeping the conversation going rather than shutting down. Have you been a part of such dialogue? Have you ever tried to initiate them among people of conflicting views and experiences?
- The author makes a great final point: sharing reflections on grief and loss could open up "common ground." Are you part of a group that shares struggles of loss or diminishment because of death or addiction?
- 4. In general, Fr. Paxton challenges us to live with the ambiguity of not having lines of demarcation that are "black and white." Would I like to live in such a manner? What steps would I need to take to achieve such a goal?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fr. Phil Pacton, C.R. was born in 1956, and was roused in northern blow lerney in hergen County. He has mor stoners and a brother. He obtained a bachelor's Degree in Chemical Engineering from Ohio University in 1976. He worked as an engineer in smallern flitnois, where he met the Passionists He first proteosed yows in 1989. He obtained as M. Div, degree from Catholic Theological Union in 1994. He was ordained in 1995. He obtained his M.A. degree in Theology from CPU in 1996.

He has served in southern California at Mater Distoresa Retreat Center (1995 - 1998), in Alabama as pietor of 5t. Mary's Church in Fairfield, next to Dirmingham (1998-2010), and now in Detreit in St. Paul of the Cross Passionial Refrest and Conference Center (2010-present). He writes a weekly reflection on the Sunday readings, and is on Facebook.



SEXUALITY AND SUBLIMATION

Fr. James Heft, S.M.



A POIGNANT QUESTION

Recently, I received an email from a young man finishing doctoral studies. He had just gone through a painful divorce. Despite his pain and deep sadness, he wanted to continue to live an authentic Christian life. He wrote, "I am not having sex now, having had it for a number of years. Before I had sex, I don't really think I had much sexuality. I didn't know how to sublimate it, because I didn't know what it was in the first place. Now I do know what sexuality is, which is not to say that I have any sense of what it means to sublimate it into healthy, non-intercourse directions."

Then he posed the question: "How do you sublimate that sexuality? Certain days are really difficult, or certain hours, when I wonder if I can continue to sublimate. I won't repress, and I think the only two options are repression or sublimation. I will not accept the former but I'm not altogether sure about the latter. I thought you might have some thoughts on the matter."

I am sure that other priests get emails like this. They are challenging, and require thoughtful responses. I thought about this young man's question, and what follows is basically what I sent him in response.



A PERSONAL RESPONSE SOME PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS

At the outset, I must admit to several over-arching impressions that I have about this subject. First, I am fully confident that our Catholic moral tradition is right when it teaches that sexual intercourse is morally right only when it is part of a committed relationship, and that people without that commitment should not be engaging in sexual intercourse.

Second, I believe that most writing on sexual morality, especially during the pre-marital period, has been idealistic and unhelpful (perhaps in part because much of the writing up until a few decades ago has been written by celibate males who have kept their own struggles with chastity private, between them and their confessors).

Third, there is very little written about how people who have been sexually active for some period of time (e.g., in a marriage for several years) but who are no longer married, for whatever reasons (death of a spouse, divorce, etc.), ought to deal with long-standing sexual activities that are, according to Catholic teaching, no longer approved in any form.

Fourth, while not so many years ago masturbation would send persons to hell unless they first made it to confession, today persons live awash in a hypersexualized culture, with pornography available 24/7 at the touch of a computer's keyboard. Pornography has become a nearly epidemic problem, and not just with young people. That said, it is worth noting that *The Catholic Catechism*, after condemning masturbation as "an intrinsically and gravely disordered action," adds that in making a judgment about the

gravity of the act of masturbation, "one must take nto account the affective immaturity, force of acquired habit, conditions of anxiety, or other psychogical and social factors that can lessen, if not even reduce to a minimum, moral culpability" (2352).

emptations and sexual sins are somehow the worst sins, when something like the reverse is true. As a student of literature, you will remember that Dante makes lust the highest circle of hell, with the least errible punishment, because it represents not something evil in itself, but the disordered love of the good. Sin is still sin, and Francesca da Rimini is still stuck in hell forever, but her husband who murdered her and her lover are in a much lower circle.

Finally, despite all the talk about the body being good and how sex in the context of marriage being a cource of grace, very few people are comfortable talking about their sexual lives, their difficulties and their need for touch and affection—and all this despite our apper-sexualized culture. Among men, one usually encounters either "locker room" bravado or embarassed silence.

HONEST AND INFORMED CONVERSATIONS

Nothing has helped me more than finding that handul of people with whom I can talk freely and openly bout my own life, my desires, practices, longings and failures. I have been blessed in particular with friend and confessor who has been over the years, andeed, over the decades, realistic, wise and immensely helpful in helping me to understand myself as a sexual person. He has helped me avoid both crupulosity and laxity.

RIENDSHIP AND AFFECTION

have come to realize that while you can live withut sex, you can't live without love, or at least live with some sense of purpose and self-understanding. When I teach college students about this subject, I ften draw a big circle on the blackboard, which I label affection, and a smaller circle (not at the very center of the big circle but a bit to the side--if I put that smaller circle in the center, then there would be no room for celibacy) which I label genital sex. What I try to explain is that the more affection and genuine friendships you have in your life, the less you will fall into compulsive genital sex. It isn't that friendship and affection replace sexual attractions and urges; it is just that one knows that there is more to life than physical pleasure, as intense, though fleeting, it may be.

It might also be helpful not to think of sexual intercourse as some unique thing in a category by itself, but as part of a continuum of the desire for connection and pleasure that manifests itself in many, many ways every day. Dinner with a very good friend can be immensely more fulfilling than furtive solitary sex. Being conscious of that truth can help diffuse some of our frustration.

BOUNDARIES AND SCHIZOPHRENIA

I grew up in a very tactile family. We touched and hugged and embraced each other. Once I became a religious, I mistakenly thought I needed to curb that natural behavior lest I appear to be inappropriately violating boundaries. With the sexual abuse crisis of the last 25 years, keeping boundaries has become, it seems, even more necessary. What's more, in our hyper-sexualized culture, touch is often perceived as foreplay. I think the environment I grew up in was healthier than is the one in which we now live.

One of the great paradoxes of our own time is that while we are indeed living in a hyper-sexualized culture, we are also living in a "puritanical" culture. We are constantly confronted with images, films and ways of dressing that are sexually suggestive, if not explicitly erotic. At the same time, we live in a culture where a remark or gesture can get people dismissed from their jobs. Or to give another example, movies that feature massive bloody killings of "bad" guys will be approved for general viewership (PG-13), while

For myself, besides friends and community, having something worthwhile at the center of my life...has been one of the most helpful ways for me to integrate my sexual life.

movies that have a scene that includes nudity get an "R" rating. There is something deeply wrong with this cultural schizophrenia.

WHAT ABOUT SUBLIMATION?

It may have been Freud who first wrote about the need to sublimate one's sexual desires. I have only a few reflections on this, though as a religious for over 50 years, some might think that I should by now know a great deal about sublimation. Let me begin with what I think sublimation should not mean. I don't think sublimation should promote "angelism," that is, trying to live as though you don't have a body, hoping simply to eliminate sexual energy. I have met married, single, religious and priests who seem to me to have become "non-sexual" beings. You could never picture them falling in love or being sexually attracted or attractive to anyone. This is not what I understand by authentic sublimation. Sublimation does not kill sexual energy. Repression often just delays an explosion of sexual energy.

Another misunderstanding of sublimation might come under the psychological rubric of "delayed gratification." If affection and friendships have important places in our lives, then at least some forms of gratification, or perhaps better, joy, should not be delayed. After all, the great commandment is to love God, one's self and others. Centuries ago, a wise rabbi remarked that a person will be held responsible for every legitimate pleasure that they have not taken the time to enjoy.

At the same time, legitimate pleasures are not forced. Though some people go through very dark periods in their lives, they will survive them to the extent that they can count on friends to be with them. We all need to love and feel loved. Persons who delay all gratification impose cruel and unusual punishment on themselves. They are also no fun to be around.

For myself, besides friends and community, having something worthwhile at the center of my life—a commitment that engages me fully—has been one of the most helpful ways for me to integrate my sexual life. But even here, an over-arching commitment can make persons so "driven" that they never stay in touch with friends or take the time to be with them. They have forgotten how to take time off and relax.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus states that "the truth will make you free." He also says that "I am the way, the life and the truth." I take this to mean that falling in love with a person is essential to being human. I also take it, as a Christian, to mean that our deepest truth and love is to worship God. Here I am reminded of Augustine, who had his own struggles with his sexual life and desires. He reminds us that our hearts are restless until they rest in God. That means that no human being, no friendship, no marriage, and no sexual activity will ever completely fill our longing for God. The best of our friendships remind us of that profound truth. If we understand that we are ultimately meant for God, and that friends and a community are the most important part of our journey toward God, then sublimation, for want of a better word, will happen in a healthy way.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Pr. Heft makes some important and helpful pastoral distinctions for each of us to keep in mind as we form our consciences and dialogue with a confessor about sexuality and sexual expression in our particular life circumstances and commitments. Do you have anyone in your life with whom you can honestly dialogue about these things?
- The author emphasizes the importance of deep friendships and community support as avenues to ensure balance in our lives. Do you have such opportunities/resources for meaningful and honest conversations?
- Finally, he reminds us that no human relationship will ever completely "fill" our longing for God. Do I live according to that challenging truth?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fr. James L. Heft, S.M. (Marianist), is the Alton Brooks Professor at the University of Southern California and the President of the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies (ifacs. com). He is the author and editor of twelve books, and is currently working on one on the future of Catholic higher education.



WHAT IT MEANS TO BE TRULY FREE ON THE INSIDE

Michael A. Conat



If you put had the fruit would array too and that the look tome to that we might have the position talked. The disk new just earlier to experience a full life. The wantering to experience his by heading not "bear safe."

Relicating back upon my life of the own of 15, 1 was not five any life to the miles. My open milities we not five any life to the miles. My open milities were not me, there were all modes to mode our more except and easy own chaptain of my life yearst troop the wever, I also to take the Good Light receive propers. Label may believe that had mark say on as control own, my one. I say just good through the mentions and it was salled in every other area of my life. I was anything but free and I sectionly was not laying.

White still in the county set, my spiritual life makes 1 now mounting it became personal. Before being inservenced, I had leadwrent fears but now I have some to know lesses. I developed a relationary with Good the way I would with any friend, by talking with Him. I was an langua sloudy reciting one propers. I was pouring out my heart and soul to Him. In this infinite groce and wordom, God used this situation to strengthen my spiritual like.

A clear lieuwit or towing a trong spiritual life is that it enables in to develop a moral compass, which helps to to discern our values and beliefs, porticularly between right and wrong. Our moral compass makes it possible for as to accept responsibility for our thoughts, decinons, and actions, and reorgative how they impact our own circumstances, as well as others. It also provides freedom of thought, choice, and attitude and it empowers as to change purselves in the better.



"The mind is its own place heaven of hell, a hell of heaven." – John Mil

It took me coming to prison to realize that I had already been living in a mental prison for most of my life. I would not take responsibility for my thoughts, decisions, or actions, and how they affected my circumstances. I believed I was subjected to the whims of fate and chance. I hoarded grudges and kept a tally of wrongs done to me. I felt inadequate competing in the rat race: failing to keep up with the Joneses. I was constantly comparing myself to others and coming up short. I was plagued by self-defeating thoughts and self-doubt. In professional terms, I had an external locus of control.

Those who find themselves in a mental prison are trapped; like a ship without a rudder in a storm, left to the tossing and turning of life. These mental prisoners feel powerless to change their life or their circumstances. They believe life will never be what they hoped possible. They feel doomed by their fate and confined by their limitations. By not accepting responsibility, they become trapped in a cycle of poor decisions and the negative consequences they reap; life is mediocre at best. Many of these poor souls locked in mental prisons can actually be found in free society. They are free; mentally, they are in chains.

When we accept responsibility for our thoughts, choices, and attitudes, we will begin to feel empowered to change, not only ourselves, but also our circumstances. Our lives start to change when we realize the liberating effects of the freedom of thought, choice, and attitude. No matter our circumstances, we discover that God has made us with the freedom to think, the freedom to choose how we are going to perceive and handle our circumstances, and the freedom to decide how we will live. We can break the chains that have been preventing us from living life to the fullest. We can choose to be bitter, or we can choose to improve ourselves, striving to be better today than we were yesterday.

My life started to change when I accepted responsibility for taking another person's life. This was, without a doubt, the most difficult thing I have ever done; and the change in my life was slow, but it picked up momentum. I came to the realization that even though I was incarcerated, I still had the freedom of thought, choice, and attitude. I felt a responsibility to the person I killed to make amends as best I could, and in doing so, felt empowered to change my circumstances. I found that I had the ability to make something positive come out of the negative I caused; in doing so my life would have meaning and purpose. In professional terms I developed an internal locus of control.

Not all prisoners have changed, but those who truly have try to make the world a better place by accepting responsibility for their actions and making amends by doing good things. Some prisoners make blankets and teddy bears for hospitalized children. Others build furniture for Habitat for Humanity. Still others raise puppies to be future service dogs. There are a myriad of ways that prisoners try to give back, despite their confinement. As one lifer told me, "I bloom where I'm planted."

"Be thine own palace, or the world's thy jail." - John Donne

Viktor Frankl, the Jewish psychiatrist who survived the Nazi concentration camps, would have seen the sign over the gate at Auschwitz that read, "Arbeit macht Frei," German for "Work Will Set You Free." In his experience, though, Frankl found that work did not set him free, as the Nazis proclaimed, but rather that freedom of thought and freedom to choose one's attitude in any given situation is what truly makes a person free. (Man's Search for Meaning pp 65-66) This choice of thought and attitude made Frankl free inside his own mind, which gave him freedom despite being inside the Nazi concentration camp. Frankl also found in this freedom of thought, choice, and attitude, the freedom to choose to give meaning to suffering, and in doing so, found he could

derive purpose from it. Frankl found purpose in his experience in the concentration camps in that he used it to create logotherapy. Mental health professionals use logotherapy to help individuals find existential meaning in their lives and overcome the frustration of living a meaningless life. Frankl's freedom of thought, choice, and attitude empowered him to see something positive amidst the horrors of the Holocaust, something that could be used to help people, liberating them from the chains of living a meaningless existence. The keys to freedom from mental prison lie within everyone. They come in the form of freedom of thought, choice, and attitude, and the acceptance of responsibility for one's own thoughts, choices, and actions. We can choose to go through life shackled and weighed down like the ghost of Jacob Marley, or we can choose freedom and liberate ourselves to live life to the fullest, as Jesus intended.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

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ARCHULTHE AUTHOR

Michigal A. Const has been incareerized for 20 years, since the age of 11. During that time he has turned his the around, earning a Duchelor's Diegots of Specialized Studies in Nelsovieral Sciences in well as a grifficates in Vision Adversary and Alternative Dispute Resolution from the Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, As a graduage under through the University of Niethern lows, to be preparing for a career in training and grief counseling upon his parole. Their passionate about empowering people in revergence adversity and reach their full potential.



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THE AMBIGUITY OF SILENCE

A REFLECTIVE MEDITATION AND EXAMEN ON THE NOVEL SILENCE BY SHUSAKU ENDO Monsignor Zenz

[Since there have been a number of excellent texts as of both the novel and the movie Silence, i thought it would be appropriate to treat the novel in a thermalic way, offering tellective points for personal or communal discussion reflection. Obviously the story tiself omindles in a very protound way the theme of this entire issue—"I iving with Ambiguity."]

INTRODUCTION

The very title of the novel is already ambiguous: is the novel speaking of the silence of God who does not seem to answer Father Rodrigues in the midst of his trauma? Is the novel perhaps trying to help us enter into the unspeakable silent suffering of the persecuted Christians? Might "silence" be Endo's enigmatic way of suggesting we defer judgment about Fr. Rodrigues' apparent denial of the faith? In Japanese, our single word "silence" is the translation of two characters having to do with "ponderous silence" and "stuck in mud," thus aligning with what the Christians experienced hanging upside down on crosses in the mud. Was Endo proposing that the voice of God can be heard most eloquently in their anguished moans?

1. SILENCE: A REAL PRESENCE

Silence is not necessarily an emptiness to be filled. Silence can indeed be a powerful presence, a mystery and gift deeper than words. Before all the great tragedies and joys of life, we are often reduced to silence. The most intimate moments of human beings with each other – and with God – are usually shared contemplative silence. Indeed, silence can be a form of profound communication.

Perhaps we could say the entire novel is an extended meditation on Psalm 22 and the voice of Christ dying on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you aban-



doned me?" Father Rodrigues kept seeing an image of God with "folded arms," remote and detached. The novel also subtly offers a very different image of God, one who accompanies Rodrigues in his mental trauma and the suffering Christians in their physical pain; as Jesus tells Rodrigues, "I was with you all along." Jesus' words of Psalm 22 proclaim not only a sense of lonely separation but also express His intimate communion with the Father; twice he cries out, "My God, my God." He has confidence that He is being heard even in the silence and circumstances that look hopeless. Ultimately, the one praying the Psalm can reach the conviction that God has been listening to his painful groans and indeed, though he may never see it, future generations will know the Lord!

- The Manual of the Manual of the Do I give and the Manual of the Manual o
- Am I able to be silent in the presence of others?

 Do I truly listen in prayer and conversation with others?
- Do I thank God for the privilege of being able to hold in silence the secret sufferings and sins, struggles and dreams others have confided to me?
- Do I believe in a God of power and majesty who has chosen to identify himself as powerless and vulnerable?
- How does the silence of Christ on the cross "speak" to me and to our world at this time?
- Can I live with the ambiguity of silence in my relationship with God and other people?
- Do I have the confidence to let things run their course?

2. TWO SINNERS SEEKING RECONCILIATION

The two major characters of the novel are the alcoholic betrayer Kichijiro and Rodrigues, the priest who apostisized. Despite their differences, what links them is the need for reconciliation with God and with each other. Kichijiro continuously betrays Fr. Rodrigues and other Christians and seeks sacramental absolution for his sins. Fr. Rodrigues dutifully absolves him while holding contempt for him within his heart.

The very last scene of the novel is a most revelatory and compelling (yet ambiguous) "resolution" to the silence. It can be read and understood in various ways, one of which is this: after many years Kichijiro seeks out Rodrigues who has taken a Japanese name and wife and no longer is able to function as a priest. Yet again, Kichijiro asks for absolution and Rodrigues explains that he no longer has the faculties of the Church to do so. After continual pestering by Kichijiro, Rodrigues finally relents. As

he pronounces the words of absolution over this man he has despised for so many years, he hears in his own human articulation the voice of God forgiving both of them. While the absolution he pronounces may not be sacramentally licit, it is indeed an act of forgiveness - that is, his own forgiveness of Kichijiro as a fellow human being. The silence has been broken!

- Is there anyone in your life with whom you need reconciliation (perhaps one of your parents, a brother or sister, a peer or someone with whom you have worked)?
- Do I see myself as one who is both a minister of reconciliation yet also in need of being reconciled?
- Meditate on II Corinthians 5:16-21 and the call to see everyone as a "new creation" in Christ.

 Consider also how Christ took upon himself our sin so that we might be made righteous: Am I willing to absorb the sins and sufferings of others by praying with them and accompanying them in their struggles?

3. DOUBT: PART OF FAITH

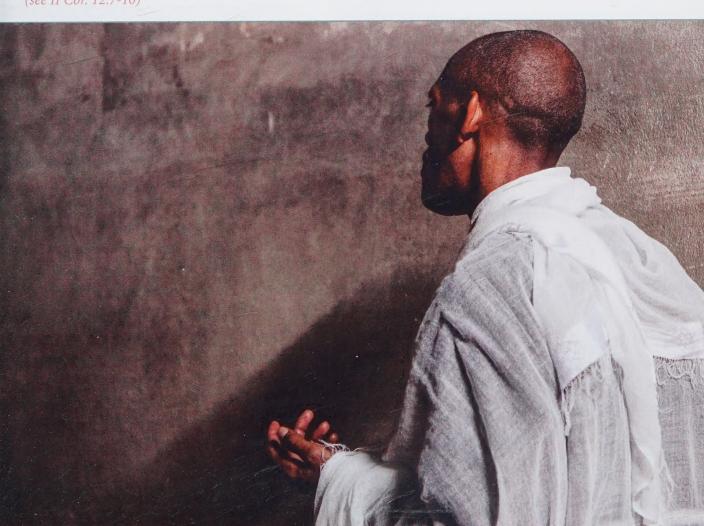
At the beginning of the novel Fr. Rodrigues and Fr. Garrpe leave Portugal for Japan with a certain arrogant confidence: they were going to preach the Gospel and they intended to disprove the stories that their beloved mentor Fr. Ferreira had apostasized. They were closed to anything that might shatter their preset convictions. As the novel unfolds they come - reluctantly - to recognize many ambiguities: being a missionary for people who have a different understanding of worship and an image of God that is not at all European. Fr. Rodrigues gradually realizes that despite his disputations with the learned Japanese Governor Inoue, he is not changing anyone's mind. He begins to understand and accept his own unspoken doubts. A deep loneliness sets in: he has no one with whom to share, no way to articulate the collapse of the carefully constructed and insulated theological world in which he has lived.

- One of the ways most of us grow in faith is by admitting our doubts and sharing them with others. Have I found that to be true in my own life experience? Am I a good listener as others struggle with being overwhelmed with doubts and the loss of comfortable assurances of faith?
- Can I identify with the story of Job, an innocent man who suffers much like Fr. Rodrigues and the Japanese Christians and hears no comforting response from God?
- Do I see the experience of Rodrigues being somewhat akin to the trauma that St. Paul must have gone through not only at the time of his initial conversion but also through his ongoing conversions, constantly being called to let go of "formulas" that were neat and tidy? Might the mysterious "thorn in the flesh" of which St. Paul wrote be his struggle with ambiguity and lack of certainty about where the Church was going? Can you identify with that same anxiety? (see II Cor. 12:7-10)

4. THE TEMPTATION TO BE USEFUL

The strategy of the governor was extremely clever: make Fr. Rodrigues endure the moans of the Christians day and night and know that if he would just apostasize, the torture of these innocent people would cease. The temptation became all the more insidious as the government allowed him to meet Ferreira, thus proving that even his great hero had indeed apostasized! Ferreira encouraged Rodrigues to follow his example and challenged him to do something "useful:" by sacrificing his stubborn pride and arrogant self-righteousness, he could end the torture the Christians were suffering.

• Am I perhaps overly concerned with being externally "perfect," efficient, organized and effective – even at the price of letting human relationships flounder or allowing my intimacy with the Lord Jesus to wither?



- Do I truly love the Lord more than anything or anyone else?
- How might I have "betrayed" my relationship with the Lord, or with the Church? Am I willing to recognize and admit failures of heart that perhaps no one else knows?

5. A PURIFIED FAITH

In a certain sense we could say that Rodrigues gave up his religion to keep his faith. He started with a sense of faith as unchanging certitudes and by the end of the journey understands that faith is about compassion - believing in God's mercy and letting that mercy flow toward others. Near the conclusion of the novel, Rodrigues admits that his faith in Jesus is different from what it once was, but at the same time he tells the Lord he still loves Him and has always loved Him! He has moved from being the "warrior" of a stern God through disillusionment, anger and feeling betrayed by God to a peaceful trust that God understands the dilemma he faced. He must now live and die with that ambiguity.

- Love becomes genuine when it suffers with and for the other. Do I believe the Lord is accompanying me and others in our darkness, in our struggles and fears?
- Can I find rest in God's judgment and trust His discernment when my own sense of guilt, shame and sorrow for personal sin is ambiguous? (Pray with Hebrews 4:11-13 and Hebrews 10:32-39).

6. SILENT REDEMPTION

Fr. Rodrigues is portrayed with some similarities to Christ: he is betrayed by Kichijiro and compares his interrogation before Inove as Christ on trial. He hears the voice of Jesus. "When you suffer, I suffer with you. To the end I am close to you."

It is not at all clear how much Rodrigues actually identified himself with the silence of the suffering Servant or that he could see or hear Christ in the moans of the people; it would appear he believed they were suffering for Christ (as they knew Him) but that none of them - Rodrigues included grasped the great mystery of Christ silently suffering still in their respective psychological trauma and physical torture. Redemption was silently happening for them and through them as they partnered with the Lord.

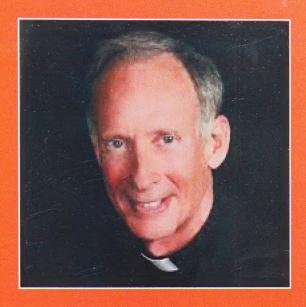
- Meditate on the Fourth Suffering Servant Canticle, Isaiah 53, especially v.7.
- ("He opened not his mouth, like a lamb led to the slaughter... He was silent...") Redemption was achieved precisely in silence! Human words could not possibly explain the mystery of so great a love.
- Do I believe that humble silence and obedient trust are indeed my privileged means of sharing in the process of my own redemption and that of all the world?

CONCLUSION:

One could say that Fr. Rodrigues underwent a conversion of sorts: he moved from being a judgmental and arrogant missionary to becoming one with the people of Japan. As he stepped on the image of Christ, he was accepting the limitations of his own humanity and came to a more profound awareness of the full humanity of Christ. Having set aside his old model of faith, he entered into the mystery of God's saving love for all people, even apparent apostates. He finds some peace and consolation in his trust that God understands. He now welcomes the silence as a sign of God's compassionate acceptance and forbearance.

Prayer of Thanksgiving for the Ambiguity of Silence

Heavenly Father, thank you for the mystery of your love expressed in the silence of your Son, Jesus our Lord, in the pain He carried without a word of complaint or explanation. As I deal with loneliness and misunderstanding, loss and diminishment, help me to be patient and hopeful. When old anchors and definitions crumble and nothing seems secure, may I find my confidence in You. As I find myself weak and weary, may I all the more depend on You my Shepherd, coming to meet me in every dark valley. I lift up to you persecuted Christians and all who suffer for the faith at this very moment. May we one day join our voices with the martyrs of every place and time giving you thanks and praise for the mystery of what we were privileged to experience in this world, a foreshadowing of fullness of life with you and all the saints as you live and reign Father, Son and Holy Spirit one God forever and ever. Amen.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ordained July 1, 1978 for the Archdiocese of Detroit, Msgr. John Zenz received a Doctorate in Spirituality from the Gregorian University in Rome in 1984. He served in various capacities in the Archdiocese including Moderator of the Curia, Vicar General and Episcopal Vicar for one of the four Regions of the Archdiocese. Since 2008 he has been pastor of Holy Name Parish, Birmingham. He became Executive Editor of Human Development Magazine in May 2015.

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